

COMEBACK



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

REBECCA JENSHAK

COMEBACK

HOLLAND BROTHERS

BOOK 3

REBECCA JENSHAK

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you for purchasing Comeback. I hope you enjoy Archer and Sabrina's story.

Comeback utilizes American Sign Language throughout the story. ASL has its own syntax, grammar rules, and structure that is different from written and spoken English. There are varying thoughts on how to properly write sign language in fiction.

Most of the time my characters are signing and speaking at the same time. For those instances, I chose quotation marks and italics. If the characters are not speaking as they sign, it is italicized only.

Additionally, I want to thank everyone who helped me in this process. I tried to write Archer with compassion and care, while remaining true to his journey. Any errors are mine and based on my experiences or those who I consulted with.

SABRINA

I can hear the music from the party as soon as I step off the elevator. The heavy bass spreads down the hall and vibrates the walls. My already frayed nerves bounce around with the beat, and my grip tightens on the champagne bottle.

One deep breath. Two.

I pull out my phone and quadruple-check the apartment number. I'm stalling. I have it memorized and even if I didn't, it's obvious by the music which one is my brother's place.

A twinge of excitement manages to work its way in despite my anxiety. I have a brother. I still can't quite believe it. Brogan Six—the Maverick's star tight end who charmed an entire nation last year during his rookie season—is *my* brother.

When I decided to look for my birth parents, I never thought it would lead me here: ten feet away from an apartment filled with professional football players.

I take another step. My boots click on the hardwood floors. Boots that were absolutely a mistake. I look like I'm trying too hard. I *feel* like I'm trying too hard.

I take one more deep breath. If I don't go now, I never will.

I'm not usually the kind of woman to get all spun up about attending a party, but this is a big deal.

Brogan has welcomed me into his life with open arms. And I genuinely

like him. Even if he wasn't my brother, I could see us being friends. He's fun and warm. When I was a little girl, sitting at home bored, wishing I had a sibling, I'd imagine what it would be like to have a sister who I could share secrets and make up fun dance routines with or a brother that would protect me and let me tag along with him and his friends to play sports or build forts.

And while I had wished a lot harder for a sister, Brogan is the brother I dreamed about. I don't need him to look out for me now, but it means so much to me that he's trying to include me in his life.

My hand lifts to knock on the door, but it flings open before I make contact. The guy is moving forward, clearly not expecting someone to be standing on the other side. He sees me at the last second, then does an agile sidestep so he doesn't run me over, all while somehow still managing to hold the door open for me. I guess chivalry isn't dead.

"Hey, sorry." His gaze sweeps over me, giving me time to recognize him. Archer Holland.

The Mavericks' wide receiver is six feet of hard, lean muscle. He's too handsome for his own good with a chiseled jawline and long dark eyelashes that frame expressive hazel eyes. Eyes that are currently examining me the same way I am him.

In the few seconds it's taken for him to realize who I am, his entire demeanor has changed. Gone is the happy, cheerful expression and instead he's looking at me with a mixture of surprise and disgust.

"What are you doing here?" His gruff voice skates over my skin, sending a shiver down my spine.

My brother's best friend and roommate looks at me like I make a full-time job out of party crashing. The smile on my face falters for just a moment.

"Is that your standard greeting?" I ask, trying to infuse some humor into the moment because seriously, what the hell?

He doesn't budge, but his voice is maybe slightly more polite when he asks, "Does Brogan know you're here?"

"Not yet but if you let me in he would." I peer around him. Or I attempt to. He's tall and broad and taking up most of the doorway. And still not moving.

I can't see him, but I can now hear my brother inside. He has one of those voices that carries when he talks or laughs, both things he does a lot of. Unlike his best friend.

“Seriously, Sabrina, does he know you’re back in town?”

Now it’s my turn to be surprised. It isn’t like I think Brogan sits around talking about me all the time, but I did assume he’d mentioned to Archer that I was coming tonight.

“Yes, and he invited me.” I hold up the champagne bottle as if that’s proof somehow.

He doesn’t like that answer. His brows pinch together, and a flash of uncertainty takes the place of his glowering.

“When did you get back?”

“Three weeks ago.” I let out an exasperated breath. “What is the problem?”

It’s a loaded question. Archer has always had a problem with me. He doesn’t trust me. I’m not sure the exact reason, but it’s been obvious since the first time I met him.

“I thought you were going to get more beer.” A new voice has my attention lifting from Archer’s scowl to a much friendlier face.

Merrick Thomas smiles as he spots me. We’ve never met, but my family are big enough Mavericks’ fans that I recognize him instantly. He’s bigger than Archer, and should be more intimidating, but only one of them is glaring at me right now and it isn’t Merrick.

“You must be Sabrina,” Merrick says.

“You know who I am?”

He gives me a shy smile and I swear he’s blushing beneath his dark skin. “Brogan’s mentioned you a time or two.”

Okay then. It’s a strange feeling to have someone like Merrick know who *I* am.

Merrick nudges Archer who finally tears his angry gaze away from me.

“Can you go instead?” Archer asks his teammate.

Merrick glances between us before nodding. “Sure. Text me what you want me to grab.”

“Thanks.” Archer finally moves out of the way so Merrick can pass, and I take the opportunity to slip by him as well.

The noise swallows me up as I step over the threshold, but Archer’s voice somehow manages to still cut through it. “Wait.”

I do but only because it’s his apartment too.

Slowly I turn back to face him. He’s in a black T-shirt and jeans with sneakers. A hint of a tattoo peeks out from the sleeve of his shirt on his left

arm. It isn't the first time I've noticed it, but I'm never quite able to tell what it is. I can't explain it, but seeing it feels like it could solve a bit of the puzzle of who Archer is. He's a mystery to me.

Brogan and Archer are best friends, have been since they were kids according to my brother. But even after almost a year of getting to know Brogan, I haven't learned that much about the guy that means so much to him. Well, except for that he dislikes me.

Maybe he thinks I'm only interested in a relationship with Brogan because he's a rich, successful football player. Which is laughable. It'd be a lot less intimidating if Brogan was just a normal guy with normal friends. Take tonight for example. Walking into a party of professional athletes is intimidating as fuck. Especially when one of them is so blatant in not wanting me here.

He runs a hand through his hair, giving me a glimpse of the hearing aid I know he wears on both ears. *Shit. I forgot to sign.* Now I feel like an asshole.

Archer is deaf, but Brogan says he's great at lip reading anything his hearing aids don't pick up. Still, I've always tried to make an effort to sign since I know how. I'm rusty from not signing with anyone in a while, but I know it'll come back to me with a little practice. Although Archer doesn't look like he's all that eager to chitchat.

His jaw clenches as he stares back at me. Whatever he wants to say is interrupted by a loud, booming voice shouting my name.

"Sabrina!" Brogan has both arms lifted, waving to get my attention. The entire party looks my way, and I do my best not to blush a hideous shade of red that will clash with my hair.

"Hi." I lift one hand awkwardly as Brogan weaves through the party to get to me. He doesn't stop until he crushes me in a hug, lifting my feet off the ground and turning in a circle.

"Woah," I say, nervous laughter trickling out. "This outfit doesn't really do spinning hugs."

He puts me down with a chuckle and I tug my skirt back down to a decent level. Brogan's teammates are easy to pick out by size alone, all of them tall and muscular, but I breathe a sigh of relief when I spot a shorter, narrower woman among them. She smiles in a way that lights up her entire face and moves toward me without hesitation to stand next to her fiancé.

"You came!" London hugs me like we've known each other all our lives instead of less than a year. When she pulls back, her smile falters. "Sorry.

Are you a hugger? I got excited. It's so good to see you."

If I weren't a hugger, now would be a terrible time to admit it.

"Yeah, I'm a hugger and it's good to see you too." A small laugh escapes me as she visibly relaxes. "This is..."

"They're a lot, right?" She takes my hand. "Don't worry. You get used to it."

I'm not a wallflower by any means, but this is an intimidating room.

"This is for you." I hold out the champagne in my other hand. "Congrats on the engagement."

London's face goes soft. "This is so nice. You didn't need to get us anything else. You already sent flowers."

"My mother told me never to show up to a party empty-handed," I admit.

"Well, thank you. I'm going to open this so we can celebrate," she says, leaving me with Brogan in the living room. A large island separates it from the kitchen.

"This is perfect," Brogan says. "We can celebrate the engagement and you being back in town. Do you want something to drink besides champagne?"

"Oh, uh, whatever. I'm easy."

I cringe and blush again. His lips quirk on one side, but he doesn't take the bait on the *being easy* comment. Maybe that's weird for a brother to comment on. What do I know?

I follow him into the kitchen on the other side where liquor bottles line the countertop.

"How are you? What have you been up to?" Brogan asks as he moves toward the fridge. Archer has made his way back to the kitchen as well. He leans against the counter with a beer hanging loosely from his fingertips, watching me with that same disapproving expression on his face.

Brogan offers me a beer, which I accept.

"I'm good." I focus my stare on my brother and not the guy planning my demise. "Still settling in, but glad to be back. What about you? When's the wedding? I'm so excited for you."

His face lights up as London approaches with three glasses filled with champagne. He takes two of them, handing one to me, and then wraps an arm around London's waist. "Can you believe she agreed to marry me?"

"No," one of the other guys hanging in the kitchen, Tripp, I think, says loudly, making everyone laugh.

“Have you set a date for the wedding?” Inadvertently my gaze roams again, back to Archer, who is still scowling. I glance away, but my face heats as I feel the weight of Archer’s stare. It’s like the man has laser beam eyes hoping to incinerate me on the spot.

“Not yet,” London says. “I don’t want a big wedding.”

“Just a big party to celebrate,” Brogan adds, then his expression shifts to something more serious as he asks me, “You’ll come, right?”

“To the party? Of course.”

He flashes a boyish grin and lifts his glass in the air. “It’s good to see you. Cheers.”

Someone must have passed the champagne around because several other guys are holding glasses of the bubbly, and when I clink my glass against Brogan’s, they all say “Cheers” and drink at the same time.

“Are you staying in town for good now?” Brogan asks.

“Yeah. I hope so. I still need to find a place to live and a space to lease for my dance studio, but yes, the plan is to stay.”

“I’m so glad. We can hang more often. I got used to the idea of a sister and then you were gone for six months.”

A pang of guilt creeps in. Not long after we connected, I left town without saying goodbye. I wasn’t thinking, but if I had been, I don’t think I would have expected him to be so hurt by it. I open my mouth to explain, but it’s a party and he looks so happy, so I just smile at him and let his words really hit. “I’d like that.”

There’s a lot of happy shouting in the living room and then two guys with biceps bigger than my thighs start playfully shoving each other.

“Maybe at my place sometimes,” I suggest. When I get a place.

“I better go make sure we didn’t leave out anything breakable.” London heads into the chaos. She’s braver than me.

He chuckles. “It’s not always this chaotic. Usually, it’s just me and Arch sitting around playing video games. Isn’t that right?”

Brogan turns to Archer, who is pulling another beer from the fridge. Brogan signs to him without speaking. Archer nods as he twists the cap off his beer and slides it into his pocket. I catalog every movement. Why does he put them in his pocket? Too lazy to throw them away? Saving them for beer cap art?

“Since London moved in, it’s less video games and more watching the happy couple make out every time I turn around.” Archer smiles though, like

he maybe doesn't mind that much and is actually happy for Brogan. The man is so hard to read.

"Like you're one to talk." Brogan looks at me. "I can't tell you how many times I've come home to him playing Ariana Grande."

"I love Ariana Grande," I say, then realize there must be some other meaning behind it.

"She's his go-to when he brings someone back. I swear every time I hear her voice, *I* get in the mood."

Archer's lips curve into a smile that changes his whole face. Gone is the irritated jerk I've come to expect and in his place is a flash of what I have to assume is the real guy. The one who doesn't hate everyone else. Just me.

Someone yells for Brogan and my brother whips his head around to find the source. Archer and I stare at one another, neither speaking. I'm too busy wondering why Ariana Grande? And what kind of girls is he into? I did some minor online perusing, and he doesn't really keep up with his social media presence. The last post was from almost a year ago when he first joined the Mavericks. Most of the photos are of him, his teammates, his brothers. Any that included girls seemed more incidental than anything else.

"Excuse me for a minute," Brogan says, resting a hand lightly at my elbow. "Don't go anywhere. I want to catch up on all the things."

He's gone before I can respond, leaving me alone with Archer. I take another sip of my champagne and avoid looking at him for a moment while I catch my bearings. I swear I'm usually confident and self-assured, but this environment really knocks a girl off her game. Not that I want game here. I'd just like not to turn into a meek version of myself.

"He's glad you're back," Archer says. I'm honestly surprised he's talking to me at all. Small victories, I guess. He's still frowning any time he looks at me though.

"*Yeah. I am too.*" I remember to sign the words as I speak this time.

"You don't need to do that," he says.

Geez. There is no winning with this guy.

His jaw ticks. "If you aren't staying this time, you should be upfront with him. I don't want him to get his hopes up and then you duck out again."

My mouth drops open. Okay, so technically yes, I guess that's what it looked like to him, but it's so far from the reality of it all.

It was honestly a shitty six months that I wouldn't wish on anyone. It's not like I wanted to put my life on hold and run back home. I love Lake City.

There's so much more fun and excitement in this town than where I grew up. But family comes first. Something I don't bother trying to explain to Archer. It's obvious he's already made his mind up about me and I don't have the energy to go ten rounds with him.

"Thanks for the concern, but it's really not any of your business." I step to the left, prepared to pass by him, but Archer is faster. He moves in front of me, chest inches from mine. So close I can smell his cologne and feel the warmth radiating off him.

His expression is pained, and his hazel eyes swirl with unease. "He has had a lot of people disappoint him. If you're going to do the same, then just do it now and get it over with. Don't act like you want to be in his life if you're going to keep flaking."

His meaning finally registers. While I was adopted, Brogan grew up with our birth parents. And they were not the best. I've only heard a little of the details, but it was enough for me to know how lucky I was to be brought up in a loving and caring environment.

"I didn't flake," I say. "I left because..." I stop myself. Screw him. He doesn't get to bully the reasons out of me. I don't want him to hate me either though. He's looking out for Brogan, and I get that. "I'm not going to flake on him."

He doesn't move, but he works that impressive jaw back and forth. "So you're staying then?"

I'm not sure what he wants me to promise. That I'll never let him down? That I'll always be here? I'm not going to do that. Shit happens. Life is messy. People disappoint you, sometimes on purpose and sometimes by chance. Nothing is guaranteed.

"For tonight anyway."

"Hey." London comes to stand between us.

I bet we look like two boxers about to pounce. Punching his handsome face might make me feel better actually.

"I want to catch up," she says, pulling me away from Archer. She drags me over to a couple of empty bar stools in front of the island. When we're seated, she smiles at me with her dark brows raised slightly. "What was that about?"

"What?" I play dumb and take a drink of my beer, followed by a sip of champagne. I've never been so glad to have two drinks in hand, though the two do not pair well.

“You looked like you were about to punch him or kiss him.”

“If those are the only two options, then I pick the first one.”

She laughs and my unease slides away. London doesn't ask me any more about Archer. Instead, she catches me up on everything that's been going on with them since I left. I missed her and talking like this almost makes me forget about the party around us.

That is until Brogan joins us, bringing some of his teammates with him. Including Archer. I note that they all stand in a way that allows Archer to read their lips.

“What were you doing in Flagstaff so long?” Brogan asks. “I thought you were just heading back to get your stuff, so you could move here, but that was months ago.”

That had been the plan but well, life happened.

“I had to sort out a few things first. Took longer than I thought.” I smile weakly and feel Archer's gaze on me. He has this disbelieving stare aimed at me like I knowingly lied to Brogan. Why would I even do that?

Still, if it's true and they all think I'm a huge flake who might bounce at any moment, I want to squash it. Not for Archer, but for Brogan.

“I'm all moved now though.”

“Where are you staying?” Brogan asks at the same time London asks, “Are you still dancing at the Lilac Lounge?”

“A friend is letting me crash on her couch until I find something. I'm hoping to find a studio space that also has an apartment, but that's proving difficult so far. And yes...” I look at London. “You should come by sometime. It's not all girls dancing in cages. There are guys too and the atmosphere is pretty cool.”

Brogan makes a gruff noise of disapproval but smirks as he wraps an arm around London possessively.

“Sounds fun.” London's eyes light up. “Let's plan a girls' night or something.”

“I'd like that.” Outside of Olivia and my other coworkers, I don't know that many people here yet and I already know I like London. She's fun and smart and I think we would be friends even if she wasn't marrying my brother.

“You're crashing on someone's couch?” Brogan asks.

“She's a friend.”

His brows still tug together like the idea of me not having a proper place

to stay is a travesty. It's actually not been bad. Sure, I live with a five-year-old that is up with the sun, but she's so cute it's forgivable.

"If you need a place to stay while you look for an apartment, you could always crash here," Brogan offers.

I hear a sharp intake of breath and when I glance at Archer, yep, he looks as shaken and as pissed as I expected. Oh yeah, that'd be a super idea. Live with Brogan and his hot best friend who hates me? It's laughable, but I'm also strangely touched by the idea that my brother is so welcoming.

Because the fact is, we haven't spent that much time together yet. Texts, a few hang outs, most of which happened months ago before I left Lake City to go home. That he doesn't hesitate to offer makes me crave more of a relationship with him.

"We have a spare bedroom and it's not that far to your work from here." Brogan looks to Archer as if it just occurred to him to check with his roommate who clearly hates my guts.

I'd kind of like to watch the way his head would spin if I agreed, but I can't consider it for long because I don't want to get Brogan's hopes up either.

"Thank you, but I'm okay," I say. "I'll find something."

ARCHER

“Cheers.” Tripp holds his shot glass up. I lift mine and then toss back the liquor. The fact that I can’t feel the burn of it anymore is a good sign that I’m drunk.

I set my shot glass down on the kitchen counter at the same time as Tripp.

“Damn. That shit doesn’t get any better the more you drink it.” He grimaces and then chases it with a drink of beer.

My gaze is snatched up by commotion in the living room. London and Sabrina are singing karaoke. I can’t hear them over the heavy thump of the bass and the noise surrounding us, but Sabrina’s smiling and tossing all that red hair around as she leans from side to side as she sings.

Everyone is watching them. Several of my teammates are gathered around her. Slade has a lighter out and holds it over his head like he’s her personal fanboy. I grind my teeth tighter.

Brogan joins in, wrapping his arms around London’s waist from behind and leaning over her shoulder to croon along with them. I can see it. The resemblance. It’s when Brogan and Sabrina are both smiling that they look alike, something about the way their eyes light up. They both look so effortlessly carefree and happy. Most people are guarded even in their happiness, but not Brogan, and I guess not Sabrina either.

A pang hits my chest. Brogan is so damn happy right now and that makes me feel like a bigger asshole, but also somehow more protective.

Fuck. So happy. Happier than I’ve ever seen him, and I’m so scared

Sabrina's going to pull the rug out from underneath him. Again.

She popped into Brogan's life last year unexpectedly. The sister he never knew he had. My best friend was thrilled. His parents are as shitty as they come, and he dove headfirst into this new relationship, so excited to get to know family that didn't suck.

I was skeptical of Sabrina's intentions in the beginning. A sister he never knew existed shows up just as he was having a dynamite rookie season? It wasn't long before she appeared that his parents had reached out, pretending to want a relationship with him, after ten years without a word, but really what they wanted was money. So yeah, I'm protective. But he's needed protecting.

Regardless of everything he'd been through, Brogan was ecstatic to find out about Sabrina and, even before the DNA test confirmed they were brother and sister, he threw himself into getting to know her. That's just who Brogan is. He leads with his heart.

Then about a month after Sabrina arrived, she disappeared. No warning, no goodbye. She texted to tell him she was going only after she left. They've kept in touch, but it hurt him. I saw it, even if he didn't say it outright.

And for all he's done for me over the years, I'm just as protective of him. He doesn't need another person walking into his life and then bailing on him.

I'm still staring when Cody is pulled into their sing-along by London. She's probably the only person who our broody teammate would let do that and not get punched in the face.

Everyone loves Brogan's fiancée. Including me. She's the best. London looks out for him the same way my brothers and I always have. Which is why it confuses me that she's so willing to let Sabrina back into their lives. She seems as happy as Brogan that she's here.

Cody looks uncomfortable, but he plays along, and Sabrina moves her microphone between them so he can sing with her.

"That's an interesting pairing," Tripp says. I forgot he was standing here. I reach for the bottle of Jager. No use in pouring it in a tiny glass when what I want is a long drink.

I don't know why I feel such a need to get drunk tonight, but I don't bother trying to decipher it.

"Surprised you're not over there fighting for her attention." I slide my gaze to him. Tripp has made no effort to conceal that he thinks Brogan's sister is hot.

He's not wrong. She is hot. Something I've tried very hard not to notice but can't deny.

Long red hair, big, brown eyes, and a mouth that perpetually looks like she's just been kissed. She has these long legs and a grace about her, but she's feisty and stubborn too. A combination that I have learned I like very much. I like it and I hate myself for it.

I still can't believe Brogan didn't tell me she was back or that he invited her tonight. When I opened the door, and she was standing there, I was shocked. And then pissed. Which is why I was so short with her. Okay, fine, I was a jerk. But leaving like she did was shitty.

"Too young for me. Also, Six told me I wasn't good enough," Tripp says.

I chuckle, a little of the tension lodged in my chest loosening. "He says that to everyone."

"Has he said it to you?"

I hadn't really thought about it, but I guess not. "He knows I'm not interested."

"Why the hell not?" Tripp seems personally offended by my disinterest in Sabrina. I've tried to keep my dislike to myself, but I'm not sure how well I've succeeded.

"She's his sister," I say, which should be reasoning enough, but Tripp just shrugs it off.

I take another drink straight from the bottle, trying to erase all thoughts of my best friend's hot sister. I've always thought of Brogan as a brother. We've been friends for so long, I barely remember a time when he wasn't around. He's the most loyal, trusting guy I know. He won't protect himself, so I will do it for him.

Wait, if he's my brother, does that make her my sister? My head spins trying to work logic in my current state.

When Brogan's parents kicked him out at fourteen, he moved in with my family. And he never left. Fuck that was more than ten years ago. He's not my brother by blood, but in all the ways that matter.

Liquor spills out of my mouth, down my throat and to the front of my shirt. Fuck. That might be my cue to stop for the night. Leaving Tripp to stare at everyone's favorite newcomer, I head to my room.

I pull my shirt over my head and toss it toward the laundry basket, then do a little fist pump when it lands perfectly in the basket.

Movement draws my attention back to the door. Sabrina stands there,

laughing I assume by the way her lips curve up and her body shakes, but I can't hear it.

The large speakers in my room blast the music for the party, making the floor vibrate along with the bass.

Slowly her gaze drops from my face to my bare upper body.

"Are you lost?" I ask as I move over to my closet and pull out another clean shirt. Except I don't watch her mouth so I'm not sure if she answers.

Sabrina invades my space, walking over to my desk and scanning the open laptop screen. I hang back, watching her unabashedly. She's taller than any girl I've dated, five-nine or so, but I still have a few inches on her. Her long, red hair hangs down her back in a thick curtain. She's lean and toned and graceful in her every move.

She turns her head to meet my gaze. "This is a good playlist."

This time I'm ready to read her lips, but she must realize it's nearly impossible to actually hear her right now because she says it again, this time signing. Her fingers move a little slow, like she's out of practice or does it so infrequently that she has to think through how to sign each word.

After our earlier interaction, I did not expect her to waltz in here and compliment my music selection. Her niceness is unnerving. I don't want her to be nice. I want her to make a choice to be in Brogan's life or not and then act accordingly.

"Thanks," I say, not signing back. I take a step back to the party, but Sabrina doesn't move. Her gaze moves around the room, taking in the space. There isn't a lot in here besides the bed, desk, and stereo equipment. The only time I really spend in here is to sleep.

Her stare comes back to me, and she smiles, cheeks flushed from the alcohol.

"I want us to get along," she says finally. She takes a few steps toward me. "For Brogan."

I shove both hands in my pockets.

"I know that you don't trust me, but I'm not going anywhere. I mean not emotionally. I don't know where life will take me physically, but I want him in my life. You're protective of him and I get that. I'm even grateful for it. Knowing he's had you all these years makes me thankful. I don't want to come between you or anything like that. I just want to know him. And nothing you do is going to scare me off, so you can stop acting like an asshole. It doesn't suit you." She signs the words as she speaks, then pauses and adds,

“I’m sorry if I didn’t sign all that correctly. It’s been a while since I signed with anyone.”

My gut twists with the sincerity splashed on her face and the words that are nearly perfect – her signing of it and what she said. I’m even impressed that she called me out for being an asshole.

The thing is people can promise a lot, but their actions are so much more meaningful. And so far, her actions haven’t convinced me that she’s going to stick around. I hope for Brogan’s benefit, she does.

“You signed it perfectly,” I say. Her face lights up before I push past her, fleeing from my own bedroom.



As the night winds down and people leave, it ends up that me, Brogan, London, Cody, Tripp, Merrick, and Sabrina are the last ones standing. We’ve moved into the living room, sitting around on the couches. Music still plays from my room, but I turned it down so I can hear the conversation better.

Not that I’m following a lot of it. I seem to have a singular focus on Sabrina, which means I keep missing what other people say. It’s pretty standard for me to stop trying as hard to keep up with things by the end of the night. At some point, my brain gets tired from the constant work of listening to the person speaking and reading their lips.

The guys are used to it, especially Brogan. Sabrina catches me staring, not for the first time.

“I should go,” she says, standing. She seems to be the glue holding the party together because everyone else stands in agreement that it’s time to go too.

“Are you sure you don’t want to crash here tonight?” Brogan asks her before wrapping her into a hug.

“Thank you, but I’m fine. I’m always out at this time of night.”

“Right.” Brogan smiles at her. “Let’s hang soon. Text me when you get a night off.”

“Okay.” She nods, then London hugs her as well. I stay seated on the couch.

“Wanna share a ride?” Merrick asks her.

Brogan clears his throat loudly.

“Relax.” Merrick laughs. “I just want to make sure she gets home safe.”

Sabrina smiles, laughing so quietly I can’t hear it. I think she likes how protective Brogan is of her. She glances over at me. I’m the only one that hasn’t said goodbye to her.

“It was good to see you again,” she says.

“Yeah.” I tip my head slightly in agreement. I can feel the tension as everyone watches us, but I ignore it.

A few minutes later, the party is officially over. London heads to her and Brogan’s room to get ready for bed, but my buddy plops down on the couch next to me.

He lets his head fall back as he lets out a tired sigh then glances at me. “*You good?*”

“Yeah. Too much Jäger.”

One side of his mouth pulls up in a grin, then it falls, and his brows knit. “*Do you think she’s staying at some shady place? She wouldn’t give me a lot of details.*”

“I’m sure it’s fine.” Though now that he’s mentioned it, I’m picturing her sleeping on some ratty couch in a shitty part of town.

“*You don’t mind that I invited her to live with us, do you?*” His brown eyes search mine. I’ve never lied to Brogan. We’ve been through too much. It always seemed pointless. He can read me better than anyone anyway.

Still, I consider it before finally admitting, “It might be a little weird. I don’t really know her.”

“*That’s even more of a reason for her to be here. I want you to get to know her. You’re two of the most important people in my life.*”

Telling him I have no desire to get to know her feels crummy, so I stay silent.

“*If you’re cool with it, I’m going to ask her again. The two of you will be friends. I just know it.*”

“Why would we be friends?” I ask, struggling to imagine what he thinks he can see so clearly.

“*Because I think both of you are awesome, you both think I’m awesome... so it only makes sense that you’d think she was awesome and vice versa.*”

“That’s a lot of awesome in one sentence.”

He chuckles then asks, “*You’re okay with it? If not, say the word and we’ll keep using that room for Tripp when he drinks too much and needs a place to crash.*”

My body heats as I imagine Sabrina sleeping down the hall, running into her first thing in the morning or late at night, or fuck, what if she brings guys over and I have to listen to them having sex. It's bad enough I've got Brogan and London banging their headboard against my wall every night.

But Brogan looks so hopeful, and I know how much it means to him. I can't very well tell him I don't want her moving in because I think there's a chance she'll drop out of his life again. So I nod. "It's okay by me."

It's only for a little while until she finds her own place and she might not even say yes. I mean, I wouldn't want to live with us considering how I've treated her. I'm sure it won't come to anything. But the way my pulse races, I go to bed wondering if I've just made an epically bad decision.



The next morning when I wake up and walk out to the kitchen, Brogan and London are already up. London sits at the kitchen island while Brogan paces, phone in hand.

"How's this for a text," Brogan says, staring down at the small screen. He's in shorts, no shirt, hair sticking up all over the place, but his eyes are wide, and his movements animated. He's far more awake than I feel.

"Hey, good to see you last night. Glad you're back in town!" He looks up. "Exclamation mark or no exclamation mark?"

My brows inch higher and I run a hand through my hair. My brain is foggy, and he is way too amped up for my hungover state.

"You're overthinking it." London smiles lovingly at him. "Just get to the point. You don't need to ease into it with a paragraph of niceties."

I slide onto a barstool next to London and work on keeping my head upright.

"Morning." Brogan tips his head toward me. "How are you feeling?"

"Shitty, but nothing brunch won't cure." I slide my gaze to London. She loves brunch, and I don't think I'll have to work that hard to convince her to go out and have some greasy food and boozy drinks.

"I have to meet with a potential client this morning. Sorry." She gives me a sympathetic frown.

Well, damn.

"What about you?" I ask Brogan.

“Sure. Yeah. I just need to finish this text.” He looks back to his phone. “Okay, how about: So glad we got to hang last night. Wanted to offer up the room again. It’s no big deal. Would love to have you around more.”

When he finishes, he looks to London for approval.

“Not bad,” she says.

“Not bad isn’t good.” His face is crestfallen.

“What is happening?” I ask, rubbing at my temples to ease the throbbing headache.

“He’s asking Sabrina to move in.” London gets up from her stool. She walks over to Brogan and lifts on her toes to place a kiss on his lips. When she drops back down, she says, “Send it. She’ll either say yes or no, but it’s not because you aren’t amazing.”

My stomach drops. I completely forgot about my conversation with Brogan last night. Dammit. Drunk me should not be allowed to agree to things.

He nods, but as soon as she leaves, Brogan looks like he has the weight of the world on his shoulders again. I must not look much better because he grabs a banana and places it in front of me and then fills a glass with water and does the same.

“Thank you.”

“I can smell the booze screaming from your pores,” he says with a smirk.

I take two large bites of banana, swallow, and drink half the glass of water before replying. “I went a little too hard. Did you already eat?”

I have my heart set on brunch. Nothing cures a hangover like pancakes and mimosas.

“Yes, but I’ll go with you as soon as I figure out how to convince Sabrina to move in.”

I guess he’s not going with London’s advice of just sending it.

“Why are you sweating it so much?” I ask. “She’s back in town. Either way you’ll get to see her more.”

“I know,” he says, but he sounds as glum as a kid who just found out he can’t keep the stray puppy he found. Not that Sabrina is a stray puppy. She’s more like a cat. “I like the idea of her being here, seeing her every day, having low-key casual time just to get to know her like I would if we’d grown up together.”

Understanding dawns on me. He wants what he didn’t have with her. A second chance. Growing up with a house full of siblings wasn’t as dreamy as

he makes it out to be, but I can understand wanting to create a sense of it by living together now.

I still hate the idea of her being here, but that's just because I'm afraid the more she's around, the more attached Brogan is going to get. And the worse it'll hurt when she leaves again.

"I think I'll wait and ask her in person."

"Good idea." Before she left, they only saw each other once every couple of weeks. That's plenty of time for her to find an apartment and then I won't even need to worry about it.

"Brunch?" I ask hopefully. I need to manage this hangover before I make any more bad decisions.

He laughs. "Go get ready, princess. We leave in five."

SABRINA

“Cocoa Pebbles or Fruit Loops?” Olivia holds the cereal boxes in either hand.

“Ooooh tough decision.” I mull it over carefully. “Fruit Loops. I never did love chocolate cereal.”

Greer giggles beside me. I glance over at the adorable five-year-old sitting on a stool next to me. She’s dressed for school in a pink, frilly dress with leggings underneath and her blonde hair is pulled up in pigtails. An ever-present tiara sits on top of her head.

“Wait. Were you not talking to me?” I ask Olivia.

Laughing, she sets two bowls out on the kitchen counter and proceeds to pour me a bowl of Fruit Loops, then the other for her daughter who requests the same.

“Living here really is the dream,” I say as I dig into my breakfast.

“You should just move in with us forever,” Greer says in the most genuine, sweet tone. I could just kiss her.

“Tempting, but I don’t think there’s room for my tiara collection and yours.”

“You don’t have any tiaras,” she says so matter-of-factly I can’t even argue.

“Exactly. No room. Isn’t it sad?”

She giggles again.

As soon as she finishes her cereal, Olivia instructs her to put her shoes on and grab her backpack.

I take my bowl around to the sink. “Thank you for letting me crash here. I promise I will not move in with you forever.”

Olivia huffs a laugh. “I’m on Greer’s side. If it weren’t for the stupid rental rules, I’d have already bought a bunkbed for my room.”

“Oh my god, can you imagine us?” I smile, picturing late nights talking and laughing.

“Speaking of, do I need to wait until she leaves to show my face?” I motion with my head toward the apartment next door where the landlord lives.

Technically, only two people are allowed to reside in Olivia’s apartment, hence the lying low.

“No. I’m allowed guests. It’s only been what? A week? Two?”

“Twenty-two lovely nights on the couch awoken by a beautiful angel every morning,” I say longingly. The couch part maybe isn’t ideal (or the early morning thing) but I’m so grateful I’ve been able to stay here while I look for something more permanent. Plus, it’s less lonely. Olivia and I have only been friends a short time, but she feels like a long-lost soulmate and Greer really is the cutest, sweetest thing ever.

Olivia snorts. “That is the downfall of kids. They’re cute, but damn do they get up early.”

“Don’t they know how wonderful sleeping is?”

She shakes her head, making her ash blonde ponytail sway with the motion. “No. They act like it’s punishment or something. Greer climbed into bed with me this morning at five.”

I don’t know how Olivia does it. She works two jobs, managing her family’s bookstore during the day and working at Lilac Lounge a few nights a week, and still somehow manages to take care of Greer without ever complaining about her lack of sleep.

“If only.”

“What are you up to today?”

“I thought I’d look for apartments and studio space. Maybe hit up Brogan and see if he wants to grab lunch or something. Assuming he isn’t with Archer,” I grumble the last part.

Her smile hitches up on one side. “How is your brother and his hot, jerk best friend?”

A laugh leaves my lips despite the swirling of anxiety in my stomach. It’s been two days since the party, and I still get hot all over when I think back to

some of the things Archer said to me. Hot jerk is exactly the right way to describe him.

“I’m not sure. I haven’t heard from them.” I will admit I did expect Brogan to reach out sooner. Before I left, we were texting daily. Random things mostly, a funny video or just checking in.

Olivia must sense my disappointment because her smile softens.

“I’m sure he’s dying to hear from you. He probably has a bunch of football things this week.” She waves her hand around like she isn’t sure what those things are, but she’s sure they exist.

“You’re probably right.” I know he’s busy and I don’t expect him to adjust his entire schedule just because I’m back in town, but I missed him. So much I’m willing to put myself in the line of fire. Because where Brogan is, Archer is surely nearby.

ARCHER

“You’re up, Holland.” Our receiver coach, Drew, gives me a nod.

We’re doing a light position practice this afternoon. Cody, our quarterback, is throwing high passes to me and the rest of the receivers while we run deep routes. The sun is high and bright in the sky, making it difficult to track the ball.

I step up to the line and wait for the signal, then I’m off, sprinting from the fifty-yard line.

When I was little, I dreamed of scoring touchdowns.

I spent a lot of long, hot summer days running and practicing footwork to get by defenders. I studied my heroes and made my brothers toss passes to me until they were bored and tired—high, low, short, long. I wanted it, and I worked hard. I’d fall asleep at night imagining the fans screaming my name.

Football is an unforgiving sport. Everything has to align perfectly. The perfect throw at exactly the right speed and right time with defenders ready to slam the quarterback or receiver into the ground. The impossibility of it all makes each connected pass this beautiful thing I’ll never take for granted. And when I cross into the end zone, some part of me still remembers that little kid who dreamed of this moment.

Even if it’s just practice and there aren’t any fans screaming my name.

Besides, if there were, I wouldn’t be able to hear them anyway.

Life has a funny way of giving you what you want, only for you to realize it’s not anything like you imagined.

We continue until everyone has gone a dozen times or more, then switch to footwork and agility drills.

“That’s it for today,” Coach Drew says after we’re done. He’s good about facing me so I can read his lips when he talks, but he repeats it when I get close.

I nod to show I understand.

The rest of my teammates are already heading for the sideline as I continue to catch my breath. We’re coming off our last preseason game. The final roster is in place, and it’s time to get to work. There’s something magical about the start of a new season. Especially this year. I struggled with injuries my entire rookie season. I played fewer games last year than I have since I started playing football as a kid.

I’m ready to show the coaches and fans what I’m capable of. The ankle is feeling better, and the work I put in, lifting weights, training around my injury, is finally paying off.

Pulling off my helmet, I walk at the back of the group as we make our way to the locker room. Exhausted and sweaty, but in the best possible way.

I take an elbow to the side at the same time I realize a few of my teammates have fallen back to walk beside me. Glancing up, my gaze lands on a grinning Walker Graham. His dark hair hangs into his eyes and he tosses his head to the side to flick it back in place. Two other teammates stand off to the other side of him. And all three look at me like they’re waiting for a response to something. It’s a look I’ve gotten familiar with since I lost my hearing.

“Isn’t that right, Holland?” Graham asks, talking so loudly that even if my hearing aids didn’t pick up the sound, I think I’d have felt the vibration in my gut. Or maybe that’s just the usual irritation I feel when he speaks.

“Isn’t what right?” I glance between the three guys.

“Sorry. I forgot.” Graham’s grin turns into a one-sided smirk. He waves a hand around his right ear. “Must be nice to drown out everything else sometimes, huh?”

I wish I could say it’s the first time someone joked about my hearing loss, but what can I say? People are assholes. Especially Graham. He was traded to the Mavericks earlier this year after three years with the Raiders. During his rookie season, he was named one of the top wide receivers in the league, but since then his numbers have dwindled. Though you wouldn’t know it by the way he walks around like he’s untouchable.

I hope for the sake of the team he performs well, but since he's also my competition, I plan to be better.

"I can hear you just fine," I say. "I was just choosing not to listen to you."

The other two guys snicker at my remark. Graham's smirk sparks with annoyance before smoothing back out to a half grin. "Funny, Holland. Didn't know you were such a comedian."

"I'll be here all season," I joke.

"We'll see," he counters.

Asshole.

I catch sight of Brogan ahead and without another word, tip my head to the guys next to me and hurry to catch up with my longtime friend.

Brogan turns his head as I fall in beside him.

"Hey." He smiles as he wipes his forehead with the back of his wrist. "Nice running. I saw you catch some beauties."

The irritation at dealing with Graham after a long, tiring practice melts away. Most of my teammates are great, but it's Brogan's playfulness and calming nature that always pulls me out of my darkest thoughts and improves even the roughest day. Maybe it's because we've been playing together since we were kids. Or because he's been my best friend since as long as I can remember.

"I'm surprised you were able to see anything beyond the cameras and microphones being shoved in your face all morning," I say, feeling my mood shift for the better.

Brogan had a killer rookie season, and the attention is well warranted. Everyone wants to see him back this year and they are counting on him to help the Mavericks get back to the playoffs again.

"Shut the fuck up." He shoves lightly at my shoulder, but a pleased smile curves his lips.

"Brogan!" I mock scream in a high-pitched, feminine voice. "I love you. You're the best player in the league! Will you sign my tits?"

"Fuck no," he says automatically, smile slipping. "My woman does not like it when I sign body parts. Unless they're hers."

I chuckle softly, able to completely picture London fighting off people for her man. She is not to be trifled with when it comes to my buddy. He's totally gone for her, like no other woman even exists in his brain gone for her, so it isn't like he's exactly looking for the attention from fans, but it still happens.

Graham and his group of minions pass by us as we walk down the tunnel

to the locker room. I grit my teeth even as I tell myself not to let him rile me up again.

"What's up with Graham?" Brogan signs as he asks quietly.

"Nothing." I shake my head. Though I doubt my tone is very convincing. "He just gets under my skin."

"The guy is a dick. You're playing great and he's worried about his spot." So am I.

"Ignore him," Brogan adds.

"Easy to do since he thinks I'm dumb as well as deaf."

"Fuck Graham." Brogan's tone is hard this time when he speaks. We've been friends a very long time, so he knows, maybe better than anyone else, what I've been through, and he takes it harder than even I do. Something about knowing he has my back lets me be free not to hold it against people so much. Most are ignorant instead of malicious.

"He's not really my type," I say, trying to infuse some humor into the situation.

Brogan laughs and his carefree demeanor returns as we walk into the locker room.

I set my helmet on the top shelf and pull off my pads.

Brogan waits until I look his way again before he says, "Speaking of your type, London has a friend —"

"No," I cut in before he can finish. Since she moved in with us, London's new favorite pastime is setting me up. She works from home as a graphic designer and illustrator, so I don't even want to know where she meets these women, but every week, it's someone else that I just have to meet because "she's so nice" or "her makeup is so pretty" or "she has the coolest job." Is that really the criteria chicks think guys are using to pick their next date?

"Come on. It'll be fun. London and I were thinking about going to that new escape room place next weekend. If your date sucks, then you can just hang with us."

"I'll literally be trapped in a room with her," I say and watch for some common sense to strike him in the head.

But Brogan was a hopeless optimist even before he found the love of his life.

"Yeah, but if it goes well, you'll be glad to be stuck in close quarters." He does a little shimmy with his hips.

I'm ninety-nine percent sure he just suggested I fuck a first date in an

escape room with him and London a few feet away.

"I really wonder about what goes on in your brain," I tell him.



It's quiet when I get back to the apartment. I had to stay for some therapy on my ankle, so Brogan came home before me. London left a note for me on the counter that she was having dinner with her sister. It's become our thing. Since she and Brogan are in constant contact, it isn't like she needs to tell him when she's coming and going, but she scribbles a note for me if she's going to be gone and sometimes, she even adds little drawings to go with it. I get a kick out of it.

I never really imagined having a roommate beyond Brogan, but London is cool and I'm glad to get to know her better. My buddy is head over heels, and I can see why.

Brogan comes out to the living room, hair still wet as he pulls on a black T-shirt.

"I thought you were gone too," I say.

"No, not yet."

"Where are you going?" A pang of disappointment hits that I'm going to be here alone tonight. After living with four brothers growing up, I've gotten used to people being around all the time.

"We are going out." He grins.

"Just you and me?" I can't remember the last time we did that. These days London is with us and sometimes guys from the team too.

"Yep."

"Where?"

"I'll tell you on the way."

I'm too excited to question him. I'm showered and ready in ten minutes and we're heading out to his truck. The hot August day has left the air warm even though the sun is down, and the breeze feels like opening an oven door. Still, a thrum of anticipation works its way through me as I climb up into his passenger seat and he turns up the music.

How many times have we done this? A hundred? A thousand? Not as many in the last year, that's for sure.

I don't bother asking again where we're going until he misses the turn for

our favorite bar.

“Trying somewhere new tonight?” I ask.

“Lilac Lounge.”

All my good feelings pool into a pit in my stomach.

“Seriously?”

“What? I thought you’d be excited. Hot girls dancing around.”

Yeah, it’d be great if that hot girl wasn’t Sabrina.

He glances from the road to me quickly. “We don’t have to stay long. I just need to find Sabrina and ask her to move in.”

“What was wrong with texting?”

“Too impersonal. Why aren’t you excited right now? *Hot girls. Dancing.*”

“I’m excited,” I say, though I don’t feel the least bit of excitement.

“Are you seeing someone and haven’t told me?”

“No. Why would you think that?” There’s very little that he doesn’t know. In fact, only one thing comes to mind. *I really don’t want Sabrina to move in.*

“You haven’t mentioned anyone lately and you’re not excited about Lilac Lounge.” He shrugs.

“No. Sadly there’s no one new.” It’s hard to find time to date at the start of the season. Or any time really.

Brogan lifts his brows and grins. “Well, maybe we can change that tonight.”

SABRINA

“Some guy is asking for you out front,” Liam, one of our bartenders tonight, calls to me as he walks behind the bar. I’m refilling my tray with shots, but I pause to glance toward the front of the club.

Olivia tips her head toward the small vials filled with purple liquor. “Maybe you should toss one of those back.”

She’s right. Sometimes we get regular guys in here who ask for us by name. It usually turns into an awkward encounter where they read too much into a previous visit to the club. I smile at everyone, but it does not mean I want to go home with them.

“I hope it doesn’t come to that,” I say before heading out to the floor. I walk in the general direction of the front door but then make my way through tables and people standing around in groups checking to see if anyone needs a drink as I go.

It’s a slow night for shots, but I’m glad to be working the floor right now instead of dancing. I spent all day looking at real estate—very bad real estate. I thought finding an apartment would be easy, but everything is either too expensive or too far away from where I want to be.

I lower my tray as I get through the crowd to the front entryway. Scanning for anyone who looks like they’re waiting for me, I turn in almost a full circle before I spot them.

Brogan and Archer. A smile pulls at the corners of my lips and a dipping sensation happens low in my stomach. We walk toward each other, meeting

in the middle.

“Shot?” I ask, feeling a little uncomfortable once I’m standing in front of them.

Brogan gives me his signature easy smile. He’s always so damn happy to see me. I wonder if we’d grown up together what kind of relationship we’d have. Would we be close and talk often or would we take having a sibling for granted? Is it possible we’d still be friends like I think we’re starting to become now? Or were before I left.

“What are you guys doing here?” I ask when neither of them speaks or moves to take a shot from my tray.

“I thought you’d be dancing.” My brother tips his head to the two cages on either side of the club. There are two more outside near the pool.

“I’m not up until later.” We take shifts. The cages are too small to do any strenuous dancing, but it still gets exhausting being on display.

“We’re here to see you,” Brogan says with a nod of understanding. “Can you talk?”

A hint of nervousness works its way in. They came to talk to me? My brain searches for answers, but I can’t come up with a single one. “Sure. Let me get rid of these shots and then I can take my break.”

Brogan reaches into his pocket for his wallet and puts cash on the tray, then takes the last two shots.

“Thanks,” I say, putting the cash in my apron and bringing the tray down to my side.

Brogan and Archer clink the glasses together and toss them back. I meet Archer’s gaze as he swallows. His throat works with the movement, and he grimaces slightly at the sweet alcohol. I can’t help but smile at his reaction, and surprisingly, he returns the expression. My stomach dips again as we continue to lock eyes.

“What is that?” Brogan asks, breaking the moment and forcing me to look back at him.

“It’s our signature drink. Vodka, champagne, and a few other things.”

“It tastes like cotton candy and summer.” Brogan grins. “I like it.”

“I feel like I just drank a pixie stick.” Archer is still holding on to the shot glass but looking around for something to do with it.

I hold out my tray and they both set their empty plastic cups on it.

“There are some tables outside on the patio. It’s a little quieter out there. Give me two minutes to drop this off,” I say, indicating my tray.

When Brogan nods his agreement, I spin around and head toward the bar. My heart is racing, and nervous energy has me moving through the crowd without registering things like before.

I set my tray down. Olivia's brows lift in question.

"Brogan's here," I say. "And Archer."

"Really?" Her eyes light up and she glances back the way I came.

"I sent them outside." I untie my apron. I'm still in my bikini top and jean shorts like the other female employees, but there's not a lot I can do about that.

"Can you grab me a Modelo and a Blue Moon?" I give her the cash Brogan gave me, which is more than enough to cover the shots and beers.

"Here." She hands me two bottles of beer.

"Thanks."

While she gets back to pouring drinks, I head outside. Lilac Lounge is an indoor/outdoor club. The inside bar and seating area are smaller than the outdoor space. The bar is just out the doors and there's a patio with seating under an alcove.

A massive pool takes up the middle and most people hang around the edge of it, sipping drinks and talking. There's a stage behind the pool where a DJ is set up tonight. On either side of the stage is where I usually dance. Right now, my favorite guy friend is up there along with a dancer that started while I was gone.

Archer and Brogan are easy to find, even among the throngs of people out here. Saturday night is our busiest and with the college kids back in town, tonight is looking to be a long one. I'll be glad when it's my turn to dance, so I don't have to mingle in the crowd selling shots.

The college guys are the worst. They're always trying to get free stuff and offering up things in exchange. One guy said he'd and I quote, 'make it worth my while.' Uh-huh. Why is it the guys that think they're the best in bed are always actually the worst?

Archer turns as I approach them. His gaze dips to my legs and up in a quick perusal that somehow still makes my stomach swoop.

I hand him the Blue Moon. He takes it after a beat of hesitation, then reaches for his wallet.

"I got it," I say, shaking him off, then hand the other bottle to Brogan.

"You know what we drink?" He twists off the cap and tosses it in a nearby trashcan. I glance back at Archer in time to see him slip his top into

his pocket.

“Occupational hazard.” I spot an empty couch on the patio and lead the guys to it. I motion for them to sit. Brogan does, then Archer, leaving me with a small space next to my brother’s best friend.

Our legs brush and he moves his over to give me more room.

“This is such a surprise,” I say, still feeling off-kilter that they’re here to see me. “Why didn’t you text me to tell me you were coming? I could have gotten you VIP access.” There’s a section of the pool with a swim-up bar that is reserved for only thirty people per night. Mostly people the club extends invitations to. If celebrities or local influencers come and share, then it brings even more people in.

I try to imagine Brogan and Archer in VIP and the mayhem it would likely cause. Brogan is my brother, but I’m not oblivious to the way women are with him. He has a charm about him. And Archer has this whole quiet, almost overlookable hotness. He’s good at blending in and not drawing a lot of attention to himself, but when you look at him...really look at him, he’s breathtaking. His hair is a little too long and he has rough stubble along his square jaw. His eyes are what really do me in. They’re a stunning hazel with long inky-black lashes. There’s something about him that just hits all my buttons. Even knowing how much he dislikes me doesn’t detract from his appeal unfortunately.

“It was a last-minute decision,” Brogan says. “But this place is cool. I like it. I’ll have to bring London back sometime.”

Another pause hangs between us while I wait for him to tell me why he’s really here, but before he can do that two women approach Brogan.

“Are you Brogan Six?” one of them asks with a coy smile.

I hear Archer’s light laughter under his breath.

“Yes.” Brogan smiles politely at the women as they start talking fast, telling him what big fans they are.

Archer glances up at me. I find myself amused at the scene.

“Does this happen to him a lot?” I ask Archer.

“Yeah. He’s got that certain something. Reels them right in.”

“Do you get stopped?”

“Me?” he asks like that’s a ridiculous question. “No. Not really. Not like Brogan.”

“Maybe you’re just more intimidating.”

“I’m not offended,” he says. “I wouldn’t deal with it as well as he does.”

Somehow, I don't believe him. He hasn't been friendly with me, but I have seen how he is with his teammates and friends and basically anyone that isn't me.

Our gazes go back to Brogan. My brother remains polite as the women fawn over him, but when one of them steps closer and puts a hand on his leg, he removes it and then holds up a palm to stop her from invading his space again. "I'm in a relationship, but it's really nice to meet you both. Have a good night."

They hesitate a beat before taking his words as intended, a dismissal.

"Sorry about that," Brogan says, flashing me a smile. "Where were we?"

"I think you were going to tell me why you're here. What did you want to talk about?"

"Right. That." His easy expression is replaced by one that makes him look nervous for the first time. Which in turn makes me nervous.

"How is the apartment hunting going?" Brogan asks.

I'm a little thrown by the topic change, but I answer without a lot of thought. "Not great, but I'm confident I'll find something."

Brogan stares at me, not speaking. I look from him to Archer for some explanation of the awkwardness stretching out around us.

"He wants you to move in," Archer says finally.

"Dude." Brogan punches him lightly in the arm.

"What? You were freaking her out," Archer says, glancing at him, then back at me, but he doesn't say more.

My pulse picks up speed. "That's so nice. Truly. I appreciate it, but I'll find something."

"I'm not asking to be nice. I *want* you to live with us."

I consider that for a moment. "Why?"

"I like hanging out with you and getting to know you. I don't know what your favorite breakfast food is or if you're a morning person or a night owl or a bunch of different things that I feel like I should know." His brows pinch together, much like I can feel mine doing. "You're my sister and there's still so much I don't know."

His words strike a chord. I didn't know he felt that way, but I get it because I find myself getting caught up in those thoughts too.

"We can still hang out even if I don't live there."

"Yeah." His voice is nearly a whine. "But you're busy, I'm busy..."

I nod at the unspoken truth. Before I left, we hung out several times,

getting to know one other. It was hard to find days and times he was free. I know he did his best, but he's a busy guy. When we did manage to grab brunch or coffee it was almost like starting over, finding that comfort with each other again.

But moving in with him? Not just him. London lives there too, and Archer. My throat tightens as I sneak a glance at him. His stare is downcast on the beer bottle resting on one thigh. He won't even look at me. He can't be okay with this.

"I would like to get to know you better too," I tell Brogan honestly.

"Then move in with us." His eyes dance with excitement.

I open my mouth to speak but then look at Archer again. This time he glances up at me. His hazel eyes swirl with unspoken emotions.

"You're okay with this?" I ask him.

A muscle in his jaw flutters, but then he nods. Okay, not exactly that convincing.

I bite on the corner of my lip as I think. I need to get off Olivia's couch soon before I cause problems with her landlord. And their place is nice and it's near the club and the locations I'm looking at for a studio. And it would save me from filling out a dozen more rental applications, hoping to find something cheap and short-term. I'm still hopeful I'll find a dance studio space that can double as my apartment. I have this vision in my head of living upstairs. How cool would it be to have a dance studio in my house? I could dance any time I want.

Archer's leg presses against mine, drawing me out of my thoughts. I meet his gaze and we have some sort of stare off where it feels like he's saying a hundred things. *I'm okay with this. It'll make Brogan happy. I'll be there to make sure you don't fuck him over. It's only until you find another place.*

Or maybe I'm reading too much into a simple look, but I decide not to dwell too hard on it. They're offering me an opportunity and I'm going to take it. Olivia won't have to worry about her landlord, and I can take my time looking for an apartment and studio.

Who knows, maybe in the process I can prove to Archer once and for all that I'm not going to intentionally hurt his best friend.

ARCHER

“I think that’s the last of it,” Brogan says as we bring the final two boxes into the spare bedroom.

He sets his box down on the ground and I do the same. Sabrina didn’t have a lot, but the room is already starting to look completely different. The navy comforter on the queen-size bed has been replaced by a fluffy white one. Two purple pillows rest against the headboard. Makeup and perfume and other toiletries line the top of a dresser. And several pairs of heels are strewn across the bed like she dumped them out of her suitcase but hasn’t figured out where to put them.

“Thank you,” she says, coming out of the closet where she’s hanging her clothes. “I told you I could get the boxes myself.”

She did tell us that and I was happy to let her do it, but Brogan wouldn’t hear of it. It’s maybe the one time in our lives that I wish he weren’t such a nice guy. This whole situation has me acting like an asshole and I don’t relish it.

“We got something else for you, too.” Brogan leaves the room temporarily. I hang inside the doorway, feeling awkward in my own apartment. I really hope she doesn’t get too comfortable here. She claims she’s going to keep looking for a studio space that could double as an apartment, but why would she do that when she’s living here basically for free?

She would be staying here for free if Brogan had his way. He offered, and

to her credit she demanded to pay her share. Which Brogan seriously played down. Her rent doesn't even cover the utilities.

I don't care about the money. It's just her being in my space all the time. I already feel like I can't breathe. The whole apartment feels different with her here to stay. Nervous energy has me wanting to pace or pull at my hair, but I don't do either.

"Here it is!" Brogan reappears with a giant gift bag. It's at least three feet tall, bright purple, and has so much tissue paper sticking out of it, I'm worried about the number of trees that were killed for this gift alone.

I cough my surprise then try to cover it with an actual cough and clear my throat.

Sabrina eyes me suspiciously as she takes the bag from him. Her arm falls with the weight of it.

"Oh," she says. "Thank you. You didn't need to get me anything. I'm the one who is indebted to you."

"It's just some housewarming things. It's from all of us. Open it." Brogan is grinning like he does at birthday parties and at Christmas when someone opens the present he got them. He's a generous dude who gets more joy out of giving than receiving things. It's endearing. Usually.

Sabrina sets the bag on top of the bed and slowly pulls out the tissue paper. She smiles hesitantly as she looks in, then pulls out a candle. Then headphones.

"Those are for drowning out Ariana," Brogan says, nudging me in the side.

Sabrina laughs lightly then sets both items on the bed next to the tissue paper and keeps going. A bath bomb, fuzzy socks, several gift cards to places nearby, and various kinds of candy.

"I wasn't sure of your favorite," Brogan says, nodding his head to the giant pile of candy.

"Gummy bears."

"Oh. I didn't get any of those." My buddy's brows pinch together with his disappointment.

Sabrina laughs so softly I almost miss the sound, but her shoulders shake with the movement and her lips curve higher. "This is great. Seriously. I wasn't trying to sound ungrateful. I was just telling you so you'd have another fact about me. What's your favorite?"

His smile returns. "Varies by my mood, but I'm currently obsessed with

those Nerd Gummy Clusters.”

Sabrina digs through her stack to find them and opens the bag. She tries one and then nods. “These are good.”

“Right?” Brogan asks.

She holds the bag out to him. He takes two, then she offers it to me. I shake my head. “No thanks.”

“Archer thinks they’re gross.” Brogan rolls his eyes at me.

“They’re too sweet,” I say and make a face. “And they turn your tongue weird colors.”

Sabrina sticks her tongue out and tries to look at it.

“You’re good,” Brogan says with a laugh.

“Thank you for all of this,” Sabrina says. “I’m really grateful to be here.”

My gut twists. I wish her politeness didn’t make me feel like such an asshole.

“It’s going to be a blast,” Brogan promises.

She nods and then says, “I should finish unpacking. Are you going to be around today?”

“We have practice this afternoon.”

“Right, the season is about to start. When’s your first game?” Sabrina asks as she opens the candle and smells it. She must like it because she sets it on the dresser, leaving the lid off.

“Thursday at home. I can get you a ticket if you want to come. You could sit with London or I could get you another ticket to bring a friend. No pressure. Just an option. You can let me know later in the week if you want to come.” He looks as uncomfortable as he ever does as he finally stops talking and rubs his hands together in front of him. “Anyway, holler if you need anything.”

He backs out of the room. I don’t know why I don’t do the same, but I linger, and Sabrina looks at me.

“He’s excited you’re here.”

“Yeah. Me too. Thanks for the gifts.”

I open my mouth to tell her I didn’t have any part of it, but instead just smile and nod.

I’m about to turn and leave, when she asks, “What about you?”

“Am I excited you’re here?”

“No.” She laughs incredulously. “I think I know the answer to that.”

Yep, I’m definitely an asshole.

“What’s your favorite candy?” she asks.

Oh. “I don’t really like candy.”

She keeps staring at me like my answer is unacceptable.

“If I had to choose, I’d say Butterfinger.”

Brogan got her some of those too, because of course he did. He damn near bought out the candy aisle. She grabs the Butterfinger and tosses it at me. I catch the candy bar in one hand

“Truce?” Her dark brown eyes swirl with uncertainty.

I consider her words, then step forward. The room already smells like her, something light but sweet. I drop the candy back on top of her pile. “We don’t need a truce. He’s happy. That’s all I care about.”

I just hope he stays that way.



After practice, Coach meets with the receivers in one of the conference rooms. He goes over game film with us and talks through our plan for this week’s game.

Graham sits next to me, his leg bouncing nonstop. It creates just enough background noise that I’m leaning away from him to better hear Coach. I miss whatever the last thing he said was and now he’s looking at me expectantly.

“Sorry. Can you repeat the last part?” I ask, hating having to ask but not wanting to miss anything.

“Of course.” Coach nods and explains it all again. This time I don’t miss a single word. In fact, for the next thirty minutes, while he makes sure we’re all solid and ready to go, I hardly blink.

After we meet as a group, we each chat with him individually. I hang back to go last and when it’s finally my turn, he greets me with a smile.

“How are you doing, Holland?” He crosses his arms over his chest in his signature pose, but he doesn’t have his intimidating stare that he reserves for games and practice.

“Great. I’m ready to go.”

“Glad to hear it. We’re going to need all the help we can get making it into the end zone this week. Denver’s defense is tough.”

I nod my agreement.

“You had a tough season last year and I know things are different now with Graham joining the team, but I’m looking to see you step things up and contribute this year.” He doesn’t say it like a threat, but I hear the unspoken message: If you don’t, then you’re no fucking good to the team.

Okay, he’d never say anything that harsh. Sure, he loves to yell at us when we’re screwing up or slacking off, but one-on-one, he’s a levelheaded guy and I know he cares about each of us.

“Yes, sir.”

“We’re still working out the kinks and seeing who meshes the best together, but we’ll get there. Keep fighting and we’ll get you some playing time this year.”

With that rousing pep talk, I head to the locker room. Brogan is sitting on the bench, pulling on his shoes when I walk in.

He must read the defeat on my face. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I say, then sign, *I’m just pissed that I’m not starting. I want that spot so bad.*

And I hate that it’s Graham in my place.

“It’ll be yours soon enough,” he says it so confidently, but then again, he’s my best friend. Of course, he wants to believe that.

Changing the topic, I ask, “What are you doing tonight?”

“Actually, I was going to ask you the same thing. I’m going to make dinner at the apartment, sort of a housewarming for Sabrina.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t look so glum.” He cuffs me on one shoulder. “London is going to supervise so I don’t ruin dinner.”

I force a smile. The food wasn’t even a consideration in the change of my emotion.

“I’ll see you at home,” he says, heading out.

After he’s gone, I sigh and get changed, taking my time and delaying going home as long as possible. I hoped that just because she was living with us, I wouldn’t have to interact much with Sabrina. But something tells me that was a pipe dream.

When I get to the apartment, Brogan and London are in the kitchen and Sabrina stands nearby. Her long red hair is pulled up, leaving her neck bare. She’s wearing jean shorts and a baggy T-shirt. Nothing about her appearance suggests she’s trying to look sexy, but fuuuuck.

“Hey,” I say to no one in particular, dragging my gaze away from her.

“Will you take her, so she stops trying to help.” Brogan turns his sister around by the shoulders and walks her out of the kitchen.

Take her? What the hell am I supposed to do with her? About a dozen thoughts, all completely inappropriate, play out in my head.

What the fuck? I cannot be fantasizing about my best friend’s sister. And my new roommate.

“I don’t mind,” she says. “Helping is the least I can do.”

“This dinner is *for* you. You can’t help make it.” Brogan stops and crosses his arms over his chest. “Hang with Archer. He’s good at doing nothing.”

I scratch the side of my nose with my middle finger, making Brogan’s lips pull into a smile. He turns back to the kitchen, leaving me with a clueless-looking Sabrina.

“Do you want to watch TV?” I ask, since the other ideas I had would likely get my ass kicked. I’m not sure which one is scarier: Brogan or Sabrina. I doubt either would like my ideas. I don’t even like my ideas.

I don’t trust her and I’m still mad about how she left without a word to Brogan.

“Sure,” she says and follows me into the living room. I take a seat on one end of the couch, and she sits all the way at the other end like she doesn’t want to be near me either.

I turn on the TV and then turn to her. “What do you want to watch?”

“I don’t care.”

She’s being agreeable. Too agreeable, but whatever. I leave it on ESPN. A few minutes later, I glance over and she’s not even looking at the screen. She’s staring down at her phone. I shouldn’t care. She’s only over here sitting with me because Brogan forced her out of the kitchen, but for some reason I find myself asking, “What’s your favorite TV show?”

She glances up, then thinks for a minute. “I don’t really watch that much TV.”

“Last show you watched?”

“Ariel,” she says, then smiles. Sabrina smiling for real is a dangerous thing. That dimple on the left side of her mouth pops out and her dark brown eyes swirl with warmth. “It’s a Disney show based on *The Little Mermaid*. Olivia’s daughter Greer picked out most of the things we watched.”

“Olivia is the friend you were crashing with?”

She nods. “Yeah. We work together at Lilac Lounge.”

I file away every little piece of information about Sabrina like I'm preparing for war. Admittedly she seems sincere in wanting to get to know Brogan and she hasn't tried to take money off him or anything like that, but she disappeared on him once already.

I glance over my shoulder. London and Brogan are laughing and talking in the kitchen, completely oblivious to anything or anyone else right now.

"Why did you leave?" I ask. Maybe if she explains it, I can stop worrying about her doing it again.

She's quiet, but the response in her body language is immediate. The friendly smile on her face melts away and she tenses.

"Last winter when you and Brogan were just starting to get to know each other, you up and left without so much as a goodbye to him. He played it off like it was fine, but it wasn't *fine*."

"I didn't want to leave," she says, artfully dodging my question.

"It isn't even just that you left," I say. "You blew into his life out of nowhere and demanded to meet him. For months you were texting him, sending letters, tracking him down so you could be in his life and then when you got what you wanted...poof, you're gone. He's been through —"

"I know," she cuts me off. "I get it. I messed up. I wasn't thinking about anything at the time."

"Obviously. Maybe you don't know how family works, but you don't just duck out whenever you want. He cares about you. Your actions impact him now."

Sabrina squeezes her eyes shut and her chest rises and falls with a deep breath. When she opens them, her gaze meets mine. "I know how family works. I may not have had a relationship with Brogan for long, but I care about him too. I'm doing my best to make up for that now. I'm here, aren't I?"

I work my jaw back and forth. She's here, but for how long?

SABRINA

The first couple days living in my new apartment are surreal. I feel like I'm tiptoeing around the guys on the rare occasions we're home at the same time. Which isn't that often. They have practice and meetings at the stadium during the day and I head to work in the evenings. London works from home a lot, but other than her getting up for coffee breaks or to make lunch, the apartment is quiet with just the two of us home.

I know it's only temporary, but I couldn't have picked a better location. Work is a five-minute drive and there are lots of buildings within a fifteen-block radius that have office spaces for lease. Which is where I'm headed this morning.

The guys are home, judging by the music playing in Archer's room. Anytime he's home and awake, the floors vibrate with the bass coming from his big speakers.

I turn off my alarm and head out of my room, still blurry eyed, to shower and get ready. I come up short as I step out into the hallway and run into a tall, bare-chested man, holding only a towel around his middle.

Yelping, I try to move out of the way, but he does too, and we collide. My forearm slides against his wet torso and Archer grips me high up on my waist. His long fingers wrap around my ribs and his thumb is dangerously close to brushing against the swell of my breast.

I finally get a good look at the tattoo on his left arm. It's all black ink work, objects drawn amidst a floral scene. Gorgeous. Just like the rest of his

body.

We're frozen. Neither of us seems to know how to get out of this situation gracefully. Is there a way?

"I can't decide if this is more or less embarrassing than if you were Brogan," I say, breathlessly but suddenly wide awake.

I step backward and look up slightly into his face. His hair sticks up like he ran the towel through it and his lashes are wet and darker, making his hazel eyes look brighter.

His expression is pinched, studying me carefully. "I know you said something, but I didn't catch it."

My gaze travels to the side of his face. His hair usually covers most of the hearing aids he wears on both ears, but with his hair messy, I can see he doesn't have them in now.

"*Nothing*," I say, and sign the word and add, "*Sorry*."

He waits like he's unsure if I'll say more, then nods and steps around me.

Archer Holland is everywhere, and my nervous system is struggling to process every little interaction with him.

His music shaking the walls. His scent filling the bathroom. And now the image of him shirtless burning into my brain.

By the time I get out of the shower, I am significantly less frazzled. I get dressed and head out to the kitchen. Brogan sits at one of the stools next to London. She's showing him something on the laptop and he has one arm on her back, rubbing small circles as she talks.

Archer looks up from the stove. We make eye contact, and I feel my cheeks flush. I need to get a freaking grip. I touched his pecs not his penis.

That said—his pecs were pretty incredible.

"Good morning," I say, then drop my gaze and head over to the coffee pot.

"Morning." Brogan looks up from London's laptop. She does as well, giving me the same greeting.

"Is this coffee up for grabs?" I point to the half-empty carafe.

Brogan and London both look to Archer.

Brogan makes the sign for coffee.

"Help yourself," Archer says to me. He's wearing his hearing aids now. I can just see the one on the right through his dry, messy hair.

I pour myself a small cup, back to feeling awkward until Brogan leans his elbows on the counter and smiles at me. "Why are you all dressed up?"

“I’m meeting a realtor to look at some possible spaces for my studio.”

My brother’s smile widens. “That’s so cool. What ages are you thinking about teaching?”

“I’ve taught everything from mommy and me classes to adult tap lessons. I think I want my studio to focus on younger dancers, though. A fun, noncompetitive environment. There are already a bunch of studios here that have successful competitive dance teams so I’m not sure there’s a market for that and it’s a lot of pressure.”

“I’ll bet,” London says. “I watched every episode of *Dance Moms*. I’d never survive. Some adult classes would be fun though. I did jazz and ballet for a very short time. I remember enjoying it, even though I was basically a safety hazard with how uncoordinated I am.”

Brogan chuckles and kisses her temple.

My brain is overflowing with ideas, and I add adult classes as another one to ponder.

“Anything I can do to help?” Brogan asks. “I don’t have to be at the stadium until after noon. Do you want me to come with you to look at the spaces?”

“That’s so nice,” I say. “But my friend Olivia is going to come with me.”

The flash of disappointment that crosses his face makes me feel bad for not asking him. I honestly didn’t think that was something that he would be interested in, but I’m learning with Brogan, there’s really nothing that doesn’t interest him and he’s trying hard to be in my life.

“Next time,” I say, and his easy smile returns.



I have seen every available property in a thirty-mile radius. Or at least that’s how I feel.

I’m exhausted. Emotionally. Physically. And broke, apparently.

I had no idea how much money it was going to take to get a place with even a few of my must-have items. I abandoned the idea of a cute apartment upstairs in my studio after I saw the monthly lease price of the first office.

We’re in a cute neighborhood, not far from Brogan’s apartment, viewing a vacant office space. Nice size, recently painted, great visibility from the road, and there is an apartment building two blocks over. It would be perfect

if I were unconstrained with things like money.

"I know it's above your budget, but I wanted you to see something that was as close to hitting all your wish list items as possible."

"Thank you," I say sincerely. I know it isn't her fault I have high expectations and low cashflow.

"What about that space on Fourth Street?" Olivia looks to me with a hopeful expression. She's been such a good friend, coming with me and keeping me optimistic.

"It was too small," I say of the unit we saw earlier today.

"And under contract." Carrie Ann gives me a forced smile. "I got the email on the way over."

My options are disappearing out from under me.

"Maybe I should wait until I save some more. I could get a job teaching at another studio." Even as I say it, I don't want that to be the answer.

We walk out of the building and linger on the sidewalk out front. It's too bad. I really did like this area. There's a yoga studio and a cute café across the street. And on the walk up, we passed a bank and a couple of clothing stores. I can picture myself popping out for lunch or coffee, staring out the studio's windows and watching people pass by.

Carrie Ann looks as hopeful as she had when she showed me the first place despite my being near impossible to please.

"I'm sorry for wasting your time." I'm about to thank her and slink off to my car. I need a nap.

"I do have one more idea." She holds her phone in both hands in front of her and stares at me with unwavering optimism.

I don't know if I can handle seeing any more spaces today. The disappointment is crushing.

"It's just a couple blocks down."

"And in my price range?" I ask.

She nods excitedly.

"Okay." I let out a long breath. One more and then I'm calling it.

Carrie Ann struts ahead of us in her three-inch stilettos. She walks with purpose, leading us down one block and then to another.

She slows in front of the last building on the street. The nondescript front door blends in so well I probably would have walked right past it. I'm trying hard not to judge it before even going in, but among all the bright and shiny storefronts around it, it's forgettable.

She glances back as she stops in front of the door. “Now keep an open mind.”

“That’s code for this place is sketchy,” Olivia mutters as Carrie Ann enters the code for the building.

“You think it’ll be sketchier than the place on Fourth Street?” I whisper back.

We share a smile. Today would have sucked a lot more if Olivia hadn’t been with me.

“Here we are,” Carrie Ann says as she pulls open the front door. Dust kicks up around us and Carrie Ann discreetly coughs.

“It’s been vacant for some time, but all these old buildings were built to last.”

Olivia and I cautiously follow behind her.

“It was gutted for resale, so there isn’t a lot here, but you can see where the dance floor was against those big windows,” she says as she walks through the empty office. The floors are concrete and the walls a grimy white, but I can see the faint outline where a dance floor might have been. “There are two bathrooms in the back and a small private office space. It doesn’t have the apartment you were looking for, but otherwise, it hits all your must haves. This location has seen a lot of growth in the past year. They put a new coffee and tea shop in across the street a few months ago and since then I’ve rented two more offices. It’s the best price per square foot you’ll find. Everything around it is at least double.”

“How is this still available?” Olivia asks.

“Why is it so cheap?” I ask.

“Eleanor, the owner, is...particular about the space. It’s been listed for ages, but she’s declined every offer she’s received.”

Olivia and I share a glance, and I ask, “Why?”

“The building means a lot to her. It has a certain sentimental value to her, but I think she’ll like you. Take a look around. I’m going to call her and see if she’s available to swing by.”

Carrie Ann walks back outside, and Olivia and I cautiously walk around.

Even with Carrie Ann gone, Olivia speaks quietly when she says, “This would be a great spot to hide a body.”

“It’s good to have a backup plan in case my studio doesn’t take off,” I whisper back with a smile.

Olivia snorts at that, then the worried expression returns to her face. I

know it isn't much, but the farther we walk, the more I can see it. It's an end unit, which means there are windows at the front and on one side. Several of the windows are cracked or broken and have been boarded up from the inside. Those will need to be replaced, but the architecture is gorgeous. A little paint, a whole lot of scrubbing, floors, new windows... My stomach dips as I think about all the work to be done, but I can see it.

I can picture a barre along two walls, wooden flooring, music playing, children dancing and laughing. Maybe I've just seen so many overpriced options that I'm starting to hallucinate.

I trail behind Olivia as we reach the back of the space. We peer into the empty room that was previously used as a private office. I can't imagine spending a lot of time in there, but it's probably good to have one.

Carrie Ann returns as Olivia opens one of the bathroom doors. A mouse scurries out, squeaking as it crosses the room. My friend screeches and jumps back, and I won't lie, my heart rate speeds up a notch or two.

Carrie Ann is the only one of us that isn't at all thrown by the commotion. "Eleanor can't meet today but she is excited about the space being a studio again. If you're interested, we'll submit an application, and she'll want to meet you as part of the approval process."

My voice wavers as my pulse returns to normal. "You mean, she'd consider renting to me?"

She nods and her lips curve into a smile. "I think she will. Any questions?"

My stomach flutters with nervous excitement as I shake my head. "How soon is she available?"

SABRINA

Eleanor is everything I might have imagined. Tall, graceful, poised. She has a head of gray hair that's shaped into a classic bob and wears red lipstick with jeans and a white button-down shirt.

I love her instantly.

I stand from the table to shake her hand. She has a firm grip and a smile that transforms her entire face.

"It's so nice to meet you. I'm Sabrina."

"The pleasure is mine, dear." She waves for me to take my seat.

"I ordered you the peppermint tea. The girl at the counter said it's their most popular drink."

"Thank you. I never learned to like coffee. How about you?" Eleanor takes a seat across from me and wraps her hands around the cup. She stares at me like she's reading more than my expression.

"I could probably live on coffee," I admit. "But I like tea, too."

Her smile doesn't waver, but my insides twist into knots anyway. Eleanor takes a sip from the cup and leans back in her chair.

"Carrie Ann says you're new to Lake City."

"Yes." I nod. "Have you always lived here?"

"I moved away for a few years in my twenties to give New York a whirl, but I missed the sun and the familiarity of home. I opened the studio on my twenty-ninth birthday and ran it for almost thirty years."

"I love that."

“It wasn’t always easy, but it brought me a lot of joy. The building changed hands a dozen times before my husband got so sick of it, he bought it.” Her eyes twinkle as she talks about him.

“Wow. Really?” I find myself mirroring her big smile.

With a nod, she says, “Charles loved a big gesture.”

I’d already gathered by her choice of words that Charles wasn’t around anymore, but then she says, “He passed the same year I closed the studio for good. I guess that’s why I haven’t been able to sell or lease out the building to anyone. It feels like as much his legacy as mine.”

“I can understand that.”

“Tell me about you. What made you want to open a dance studio? It’s a lot of work.”

“Oh gosh. A million things.” I sit forward with my elbows resting on the table and then immediately lean back when some ancient manner advice about that being impolite flashes in my mind. “I started dance classes when I could barely walk. My mom said when I was a baby, she could set me in my carrier in the front of the room and I’d sleep through tap class or watch the ballet dancers too enthralled to cry.”

“Was she a dancer too?”

I nod. “She was my first dance teacher.”

“That must have been special.”

“It was.”

“I never had any girls. Only a boy who preferred playing outside with mud and sticks.”

“He didn’t want to carry on the studio anyway?” I ask. Even if he wasn’t interested in running it, he could have taken over and found someone else to do the day-to-day.

“No. He went away to college and never came back. Will and his wife are in Florida where her family lives.” She sighs. “He’s been on me to sell it and be done with it. He worries about me here alone. And I’ve had some good offers, but the thought of it turning into a shipping center or one of those cash loan places makes my skin crawl.”

“The location is great. It’s such a cute area.” I glance around. The café is only a block down from the studio and this afternoon it’s filled with people working on laptops and groups of friends talking and laughing.

“It wasn’t always. This used to be a bank. The pizza place at the end of the street was an insurance office. And there was a dry cleaner next door to

the studio. I could do just about all my errands on my lunch break.” She smiles. “It was a quiet, commercial area, but nothing like what it’s become.”

“I tried to look up the studio, but I couldn’t find a lot. What sort of dance did you teach?”

“Ballet, mostly. Jazz, tap, lyrical, even a ballroom class or two, though it was not my strong suit.” The way she lights up when she talks about it, I can tell how much she loved it.

“What was your favorite?”

“Oh, that’s a hard question.” She takes a moment to think. “There’s nothing cuter than a three or four-year-old in a tutu.”

“Agreed.” I picture Greer in her princess costumes.

Eleanor and I talk so long that my tea goes cold. She tells me more about the studio, everything from the recitals they had twice a year to the summer camps. My head is spinning with more ideas, and I’ve completely forgotten that it’s not a foregone conclusion that the space will be mine until she stops talking and looks at me seriously.

“So, Sabrina…”

“Yes?” My stomach works itself into knots while I wait for her to continue.

“Have you seen the building?”

“Yes, Carrie Ann walked me through it yesterday.”

“Then you know that it needs a lot of work.”

“I like that it’s a clean slate.”

“That’s a generous assessment. We completely cleared it out after the studio closed and it’s sat vacant for a while. The floors are wrecked, the windows need to be replaced, and that’s nothing to the caked-on layers of dust.”

“It needs a good cleaning,” I admit with a grin. “But I’m not afraid of the work.”

She’s still looking at me in a way that tells me she likes me but isn’t convinced. This is my opportunity to make sure she knows what it means to me.

“I wanted the space before I met you, but now it feels like fate or something. Maybe that’s presumptuous, but I’d love to honor your memory and Charles’ by opening a new dance studio there. I will work hard and give it everything I have. It’s been my dream for so long. It might take some time, but I won’t give up.”

I force myself to stop talking. I've made my case. Though I'm not above begging if it'll help.

Eleanor extends one arm across the table. "I don't believe in fate, but I do believe in you. You have passion and spunk."

I glance down at her open palm and place mine in hers. She squeezes gently.

"Does that mean you're going to rent me the space?"

A small laugh leaves her lips. "That's exactly what it means."



I am still on a high when I get back to the apartment. I called my mom and dad to tell them the news and then I texted Olivia, and I'm still beaming. I can't wait to share with Brogan. I know he'll be excited. He's always excited.

Unfortunately, when I step into the apartment he's nowhere to be seen and instead Archer and his teammate Tripp are in the living room.

"Sister Six!" Tripp calls from the couch, raising one arm to me.

"Hey, Tripp." I set my purse on the counter and smile at him.

Archer briefly meets my gaze, and I get a tiny chin jut as a greeting.

"Where's Brogan?" I ask them.

The apartment is too quiet for him to be here unless he's sleeping.

"He and London are out on a date, staying in some swanky hotel for the night," Tripp says. "He sent me over to keep Archer company."

"Is that why you're here?" Archer asks him. "I thought you were letting me kick your ass at Street Fighter."

"I'm not letting you do anything, sadly." Tripp tosses his controller onto the couch beside him.

Their bickering fades to the background as my disappointment takes front and center. I hadn't even realized how much I was looking forward to celebrating with Brogan until now. I just knew he'd be so excited and make a big deal out of it, and I guess I wanted that tonight. My parents are too far away to meet up for a last-minute celebration, and Olivia has to work tonight.

"What about you?" Tripp asks, drawing my attention back to him and Archer. They're both looking at me.

I blink away the fog. "Sorry, what?"

"What are you doing tonight?" Tripp asks me. "Wanna hang out with me?"

Archer isn't any fun."

"She works nights," Archer says before I can answer for myself. I can't tell by his tone if he's trying to be helpful or make sure I don't interfere with their night of gaming.

"I'm off tonight."

"Then you gotta come out with us. We're going to a new bar down the street." Tripp grins wide and I finally come back to reality. The one where Tripp thinks it's no big deal to invite me to hang out with him and Archer. Does he not know how much Archer dislikes me?

He wouldn't even call a truce, and then chastising me, claiming I didn't know about family. I get angry again just thinking about it.

"Thanks for the invite, but I have plans."

Archer looks relieved. Ugh. Hot, frustrating jerk.

"Doing what?" Tripp asks.

I wasn't expecting to be put on the spot and my brain goes empty. It doesn't help that I have very few friends here.

Tripp smiles like he knew I was bluffing all along. "Yeah, that's what I thought. You're coming with us, Little Six."

Going out with Tripp does sound fun. He's a lot like Brogan in that he always seems to find a good time or make one, but I sneak another glance at Archer. I can't read a thing about his expression. Would it kill him to smile?

There's a very real chance he's going to ignore me all night and I'll be the third wheel at the bar, but at least I'll get a mini celebration out of it. And worst case I'll have one drink and walk home. Archer Holland doesn't get to ruin this day for me.

I look straight at him, heart fluttering excitedly as I smile back at him. "Okay. I'm in."



I did not stop after one drink.

I'm on drink number...a lot.

Archer is at the bar talking to some woman. A very pretty blonde with curves that have every guy in this place looking her way. Women too, including me. Though my attention is more on the man next to her and how happy he looks. He's actually smiling. I didn't know his mouth could open so

wide.

“Here we go,” Tripp says, setting another round of drinks down in front of us.

My stomach lurches at the sight of the shot glasses he sets down next. The man can drink.

He picks up one and holds it in the air. “To the studio!”

“Shh!” I say, probably louder than he had. I swivel around to look at Archer.

“Relax. He’s not paying any attention to us.”

I nod and pick up my shot. I really should stop, but Tripp has been such a trooper in helping me celebrate. I let it slip after drink number two. Around the same time that Archer started talking to the hottie at the bar.

We clink our glasses together and then throw back the cinnamon-flavored liquor.

“Either I’m drunk or it’s starting to grow on me.”

Tripp grins and rests his elbows on the high-top table. The bar is busy for their opening weekend. The place has a cool vibe. It’s small enough to feel intimate but big enough to pack quite a few people in. The bar runs along one side and there are tables surrounding it in an L-shape. There aren’t dart boards or billiards or any of that, so people are limited to sitting around and talking or watching the single TV above the bar.

“You know, he’s not such a bad guy when you get to know him.”

“Who?” I ask, tearing my gaze away from the guy I’m highly certain he was just referring to. I don’t know what it is about his stupid, hot face.

Tripp doesn’t call me out on staring at Archer across the bar; he just laughs. “Actually, I lied. He’s a great guy when you get to know him. But something tells me you already know that.”

“Can he be a great guy and also have such terrible taste? Hating me, I mean.” I pick up my beer and take a long drink.

“He doesn’t hate you.”

“Well, he doesn’t like me very much.”

“That’s not true. He’s just projecting his fears onto you. The two of you just need to spend more time together.”

I open my mouth to object more, but Tripp stands tall and waves his hands above his head until Archer glances our way. Tripp motions him over and I watch in panic as Archer says something to the woman at the bar and then heads our way.

“I think I’ll go get another drink from the bar,” I say and take a step in that direction.

Tripp reaches out with a hand around my forearm and pulls me back just as Archer arrives at the table.

“You stay,” he tells me. “I’ll get us drinks.” He looks at Archer. “Another Blue Moon?”

But Tripp is already walking away.

“I was literally just there,” Archer says and brings the bottle to his mouth.

His throat works with a swallow and his hazel eyes snap to me, catching me staring at him. I glance away quickly and take another drink of my own beer.

“Having fun?” he asks.

“Yes. I am actually. Sorry I ruined your night by tagging along. Actually, no, I’m not sorry. No regrets. Hashtag, living my best life regardless of you being all hot and angry all the time.”

Oops that hot part was an inside thought.

He lifts one brow and regards me with a hint of amusement on his face.

Tripp returns quickly with three new beers and another round of shots.

“I don’t think I can have any more shots.”

“Cheers with us anyways.”

We all take a shot glass and lift it to the center of the table. My fingers holding the glass brush against Archer’s and my skin hums with electricity that I blame on the alcohol.

“What should we drink to?” Tripp asks.

“To a hell of a hangover tomorrow,” Archer says quietly and a little grumpily. How can he be so cranky at a bar?

“To Sabrina.” Tripp looks to me. “We’re glad to be out tonight with you instead of your brother. He’s always talking about love and couple-shit.”

The smallest snort of laughter comes from Archer next to me. His body shakes with the movement and his fingers brush against mine again.

Tripp’s eyes twinkle with mischief. “And because you’re way hotter than your brother.”

A surprised burst of laughter leaves me.

Archer and Tripp move their glasses higher. “To Sabrina.”

I’m the last to bring the shot to my lips. I tip it back and end up drinking the whole thing despite my earlier reservations. Archer was right about the hangover tomorrow. It’s a good thing I have my own room right now. Greer

is cute, but I have a feeling tomorrow would be especially brutal with her waking me up at five o'clock in the morning.

Tripp sets his glass down with a thunk and backs away from the table. "I gotta use the bathroom."

I let out a long breath and try not to sway on my feet.

"You alright?" Archer asks me.

"I think I've had about five too many drinks. Standing feels like an Olympic sport."

He glances to the left and then steps away from me like he's bored with me or my answer or maybe just doesn't want to be around me a second longer. What an asshole —

Before I can finish the thought, he's nodding to the group at the table next to us and taking an empty chair with a quiet thanks. He sets it beside me without a word.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." He finally lets his gaze linger on my face.

My skin flushes hotter, but I don't look away.

"Trying to keep up with Tripp will always end badly. Trust me. I've tried." A hint of a smile accompanies his words of advice.

"I'll remember that for next time."

"Okay." Tripp returns, rubbing his hands together. "Another round?"

"No." Archer drains the rest of his bottle and sets it on the table. "We're heading out."

"But it's still early," Tripp whines.

"It really isn't and I want to get up early in the morning for a run."

"A run." Tripp scoffs, then he motions toward me. "We can't go. She's celebrating tonight."

Archer's brows pinch together, and he glances at me. Tripp's face scrunches up, and he shoots me an apologetic look while Archer's attention is still on me.

"I think I've celebrated my return to Lake City quite enough. Thank you for the drinks. I drank them good."

He laughs. "You sure did, Little Six."

"I'm not a Six."

"You're right, baby. You're a hard ten."

Archer groans. "That was a terrible line. Even for you."

Tripp smirks. "I'm not wrong though, am I?"

Archer's jaw is tight as he flicks his stare to me. "No. You're not wrong."

SABRINA

“Aunt Brina, this place is not very clean.” Greer’s adorable face scrunches up as she looks around my studio.

It’s not that different than the face her mom made the first time she saw this place, but I am not deterred. I can see the potential.

“No, it’s not,” I tell her. Greer is five and has no problem speaking her opinion on all things. She hates bananas, bedtime, and bugs with equal measure.

“That’s why we have to clean it up. So people will come and dance with us.” I find an extra broom and twirl in a circle before handing it to her.

She giggles and spins the same way I did. Her blonde ringlets bounce around her shoulders as she comes to a stop, grinning so wide I can see every single one of her teeth.

“We’re going to need a lot more than a couple brooms.” Olivia blows out a breath that puffs out her cheeks, but like the true friend that she is, pulls out her phone and starts some music for us before jumping in to help.

I am not blind to the amount of work that needs to be done in here, but I truly can see it all cleaned up and full of life again. And more importantly, I can see myself here. I always wanted to live and work in an area with a lot of people and things happening. I can grab coffee across the street and lunch at the pizza place or grab a drink at the bar a block away after the day is done. I want this. I’ve wanted it for a long time and now that it’s finally happening, a little dirt (okay, fine, a lot of dirt) isn’t going to scare me away.

Olivia and Greer stay until dinnertime. We make some good progress on cleaning the front windows, but it's like every step shows just how bad everything else is.

"Do you want to come over for pizza night?" Olivia asks.

My stomach growls, but I shake my head. "Thank you, but I want to stay a little while longer while I still have light."

"When does the electrician come?" She grabs her purse and hooks it over one shoulder.

"Next week." I hold up my fingers and cross my middle finger over my pointer finger. "Hopefully the weather stays bearable until then."

We're having an unseasonably cool few days, and that mixed with a couple fans blowing air are the only reason it's not scorching hot in here.

Olivia mimics my motion, crossing fingers on both hands. Greer does too. As soon as they're gone, I miss the company, but I get back to work.

Aside from the front windows being cleaned, the main room is swept and I've washed one wall. Can I just paint over the dirt? I'm not sure, but I add it to the list of things I need to google later. When the sun is setting and I have to seriously pee (I haven't braved the bathroom yet for fear of the animals living there), I head home.

My chest is tight as I walk into the apartment and my breathing is a little shallow. I may need to start wearing a mask while I'm there so my asthma doesn't flair up. Archer's music vibrates the floor, but I don't hear or see him or my other roommates.

I head straight for the shower to rinse off the grime and sweat, and then get dressed for work at Lilac Lounge.

Exhaustion has seeped into my bones. I so wish I didn't have to go tonight. The hangover this morning combined with being on my feet all day at the studio, pretty much ensures I'm going to be a zombie by the time my shift is over.

At first glance, the living room is also empty but then a grunt of noise catches my attention. I peer over the couch to see Archer on the floor doing sit-ups. Shirtless.

"Holy mother of—" I slap a hand over my mouth in time to keep whatever inside thoughts were about to slip out. But I can't seem to stop myself from gawking at his chiseled torso. His abs ripple with the movement, showing off every one of the six—nope make that eight—packs of muscle.

He slows when he sees me but doesn't stop until he finishes a few more.

Archer wipes his brow with the back of his wrist and then rests his elbows on his bent knees.

I am still gawking.

With only a pair of black shorts on, he somehow looks bigger than normal. I think it's all that broad muscle on display. It's intimidating, but not so much so that I'm not imagining what it'd be like to run my palms down his chest and stomach like he's my own personal plaything.

"Everything okay?" he asks. A slow smile tips up the corner of his lips.

"Yep!" I chirp too fast and too high-pitched, finally tearing my gaze away from him. My cheeks flame. I don't think there's any playing off the fact I was just very much checking him out. I think it must be a reaction to him saying I was hot last night. Which is what I will claim if interrogated. He brought it up and now I can't look at him and not think about it.

Turning on my heel, I head into the kitchen to make myself a sandwich before work. I pull out the bread and peanut butter in a haze.

How are his ab muscles real? I've been an athlete my entire life and my stomach doesn't look like that. I also don't do sit-ups basically ever so there's that.

I'm opening the refrigerator and searching for the jelly when I hear him moving behind me. Then I feel his presence.

Hand still on the door of the fridge, I glance back. He's standing a foot away, sweaty and still shirtless. And unfortunately, still hot.

"Did you need something?" I ask. I'm very proud of myself when I manage to hold eye contact. I cannot give him the satisfaction of checking him out again.

He points into the fridge, and when I just stand there, he steps forward. Instinctively, I move out of his way, but there's not a lot of room, so he's still all up in my space as he digs in the refrigerator. His back has muscles that I didn't realize existed and I'm eye-level with the tattoo on his left shoulder. The flowers are roses. I'm also able to pick out a football, the number eighteen, and a bow and arrow.

I also notice another tattoo on the inside of his right arm that I hadn't before. There are five circles and only the fourth one is colored in with black ink. I've seen it before. Brogan has something similar in the same spot.

Archer steps back and holds up the Gatorade as if showing me proof he really needed something. And then extends his other hand toward me with the jelly I'd been searching for.

“Thanks.”

He nods and moves out of the way.

Archer takes a seat on one of the stools in front of the island. I can feel his eyes on me as I make my peanut butter and jelly sandwich. There isn't a sexy way to eat a sandwich. Not that I care about being sexy for Archer.

“How was the hangover this morning?” he asks as the front door opens.

I glance over in time to see Brogan and London walk into the apartment.

“Hey!” I smile at my brother and his fiancée, relieved to see them. Archer and I alone together is painful. Which reminds me I didn't answer him. I look back to Archer. “It was rough. I'm thankful I took some Advil before bed.”

“Hey.” Brogan slides onto a chair next to Archer, but looks to me as he says, “I heard you tried to keep up with Tripp last night at the bar.”

“Tried and failed.” I take a bite out of my sandwich.

My brother laughs softly. “Someone should have warned you. The guy can drink.”

“I did warn her. She didn't listen.” Archer's gaze burns into me.

“I was celebrating,” I say defensively and then smile as I glance to Brogan. “I found a place for my studio yesterday.”

“No way!” Brogan's excitement is exactly what I expected. His mouth pulls into a big smile and his eyes light up. He gets to his feet and holds out his long arms, walking toward me.

I walk into his hug and he wraps me up, bouncing a little before he lets me go.

“That's incredible news. I wish I'd known.” He turns a very pointed glare at Archer.

“He didn't know,” I tell Brogan.

A crease forms between his brows as he looks between me and Archer but then he nods. “We need to celebrate.”

“That's not necessary.”

“It is so necessary,” London interjects. “Plus, he'll use any excuse to throw a party.”

She points a finger toward my brother who just grins.

“Well, it'll have to be another night because I have work.” Which I'm now going to be late for if I don't hurry.

“We have a game tomorrow, but maybe Monday night?” Brogan asks.

“Yeah.” I nod.

“You're still coming with me tomorrow, right?” London smiles. She

lowers her voice like she's telling me a secret as she adds, "If you don't come, Brogan is going to be very sad."

"I only want her to come if she wants to come," he says but then looks at me with a pleading expression.

"I'm definitely coming, and I'd love to go with you." When she offered, I wasn't sure if she was just being nice or if she really wanted me to sit with her. She often brings her own friends with her to watch, so she doesn't strictly need me to have someone to sit with during the game.

"Yeah. It's going to be so much fun."

"Great," I say. "I guess I'll see you all tomorrow then." I take my sandwich with me toward the door. Guess I'm eating on the drive to work.

ARCHER

The night before a game, I always struggle to fall asleep. Brogan and London invited me to watch movies with them, but by ten o'clock, they're off to bed and I'm basically alone in the apartment.

I play video games until after one. Okay, I might be waiting up to see if Sabrina makes it home before I crash. I'm still thinking about last night. How she was celebrating finding a studio space and I had no idea. Tripp knew. I put that together even before I texted him to verify.

I feel like a jerk but how was I supposed to know if she didn't tell me?

At one thirty my eyes are finally starting to get heavy. In my room, I turn on the music. I keep the volume low, but the bass high. I love music. Always have. Losing my hearing didn't impact that. I still love a good rock ballad or some heavy drums. I'll even go twangy with some country occasionally.

Tonight, I'm going old school with some '80s hair band tunes. It reminds me of my brothers and of my mom. The five of us would jam out while doing chores around the house or in the car or on the occasional Sunday afternoon when Mom made us help her clean up around the bar she owned. We all seemed to get along better with the music up too loud for us to argue.

I take out my hearing aids and fall asleep to the gentle lull of Bret Michael's crooning about looking for a good time.

Sometime later, my eyes flutter open. I lie there for a moment, instinctively listening and glancing around to figure out why I'm awake. Light streams in from under the crack of my door. I check the time on my

phone. It's just after three. Damn. If Sabrina is just getting home that's a late night.

I lie there a while longer, waiting for the light to go out. A distant noise grabs my attention instead. I can't make it out, but something tickles in my ear. I reach for my hearing aids and put them in, and the sound comes into focus. It sounds like she's coughing. It goes on so long that I worry she's choking or something.

My feet swing over the side of the bed, and I hurry out of my room. Adrenaline courses through me. I glance toward her room, but it's dark and the door is open. She never sleeps with it open. The light is coming from the bathroom. The door is cracked, but I hesitate as I reach it.

The coughing has stopped, but it sounds like her breaths are short and ragged.

"Sabrina?" I knock on the door and wait a second for her reply. It comes nonverbally as she pushes the door wider and meets my gaze.

Her brown eyes are watery, and she has a sort of panicked look on her face.

"What's wrong?" I ask, fear grabbing hold of me even before I know why.

"Asthma," she manages to croak out and then another coughing fit takes a hold of her. Her entire body goes rigid.

"What can I do to help?"

She starts to answer, and I shake my head, then sign the question.

She understands my intention and signs back, *Nothing. It'll pass.*

She leans forward slightly, resting one hand against the vanity. Her shoulders are tense, and every breath looks torturous.

It turns out, I'm not good at doing nothing while Sabrina struggles to breathe.

I spot the inhaler clutched in her right hand.

"*Did you already take it?*" I ask, signing too so she won't try to talk back.

She nods. *I'm okay. My chest feels looser already.*

"*Should you sit or something?*" Aside from the toilet or the edge of the tub, there aren't a lot of options, so when she nods again, I take her hand and lead her back to my room.

It's closest and I'm not really thinking about anything except getting her comfortable as quickly as possible. I pull the comforter up to make the bed

and she sits on the edge.

She has a dazed look that freaks me out.

“Do you want water?”

Sabrina doesn't respond and I squat down in front of her.

“Hey.” I drop one hand to her bare knee. Her lashes flutter and her gaze moves to where I'm touching her and then up to my face.

Seconds pass while we're locked in a stare, neither of us speaking or looking away. My pulse races. I have never felt more helpless.

“Do you want water?” I finally ask again, only moving the hand on her knee long enough to sign the question.

She shakes her head and exhales a long, shaky breath, then aims a wobbly smile at me. *“I'm okay.”*

The more she says it, the less I believe her. Though her breathing seems to be evening out and the scared look on her face is retreating. I doubt she can say the same about mine. Holy shit. I stand and run my hands through my hair as the adrenaline fades.

I take a seat beside her. My body feels like I'm the one that just went through something. That was intense.

We sit in silence until I can tell that whatever just happened has passed. Her chest rises and falls in a normal rhythm and her fingers unclench from around the inhaler.

“Sorry,” she whispers, blinking and looking around like she's just realizing where she is. *“I didn't mean to wake you up. I'm usually better at catching an attack before it hits me like that.”*

She rubs at her chest as stands.

I move in front of her, blocking her path. *“Where are you going?”*

“To my room.”

I take another breath, trying to loosen the panic still racing through my bloodstream. *“The only place you're going is the hospital.”*

“They'll just tell me what I already know.”

Right. I guess maybe she knows better than I do, but I'm hard-pressed to believe she should be alone right now. *“Does that happen often?”*

“It's been about seven months since the last one.” She offers me a small smile. *“I'm fine. Really. You don't need to worry about me dying on your bathroom floor. Or maybe I should apologize for not dying.”*

Does she really think I want her dead? Jesus. I'm not sure I've ever felt like more of an asshole.

How did things get so twisted?

I don't want anything bad to happen to her. I just want to protect my best friend like he's always done for me.

Whatever my reasoning, I know Brogan wouldn't want me to let her slink back to her room alone when she obviously just went through something traumatic.

"Do you want me to get Brogan?"

He'd be better at this.

"No. Definitely not. I'm fine."

Fine? Is she serious?

She must sense my disbelief because her entire body softens and she says, "Really. I'm okay. And I'm sorry I woke you up."

"Don't be. I'm glad I was here. Although I'm pretty fucking useless. I had no idea what to do. Are you sure you don't need to go to the hospital?"

Not being able to breathe feels like a big fucking deal.

"No. I only needed one puff from the inhaler."

I guess I still don't look convinced because she adds, "I'll call my doctor in the morning, but it just happens."

I knew she had asthma, but I guess I've never really known someone who has it because that was way worse than I was imagining.

"What causes it?" I ask her.

"Mine is the worst when I'm stressed, but working in the dusty studio all day is probably what brought it on this time."

Right. The studio space she was celebrating last night while I was wishing she'd stayed home. Yet another reason to feel like an asshole.

"We were busy at the club tonight so I wasn't monitoring the symptoms as well as I should have been," she says like it's her fault.

"I hope you can go back to sleep." She starts for the door, but I reach out without thought. My fingers circle around her forearm and Sabrina pauses, gaze locking on the spot where I'm touching her. I drop my hand.

"Don't leave yet. You freaked me out. If you go to bed now, I'm going to lie awake all night listening to make sure you're still breathing." I'm aware that all my reasonings sound selfish, but I doubt she'd believe me if I told her I was worried about her.

"I promise that I'm okay," she says, but she sits back down on the bed and my panic retreats.

She probably wants to go to sleep, but I'm glad when she settles in,

pulling one knee onto the bed and letting her other leg dangle off the side, so she can better face me.

The lights are still out in my room, but I always leave the curtains open and tonight there's a full moon.

"Your brother would kick my ass if he found out I left you after... whatever that was."

"An asthma attack."

Even the words have dread swirling my gut.

"What'd you guys do tonight?" she asks. Her voice is still slightly strained, but I figure she knows her body well enough to decide if it's okay to talk instead of sign, and in truth, I like hearing her voice. It has a raspy quality to it that feels good in my chest.

"We stayed in. Had a movie night. Which went exactly as you'd imagine," I say, feeling a smile loosen. "Brogan can't sit still long enough for a movie, even if his girl is around to distract him."

"They're cute together."

"Yeah," I say with a nod. "He found a good one. She has this effect on him. It's like he's more himself somehow now that they're together."

The words are out before I realize how dumb they sound. "That probably doesn't make any sense."

"No, actually, I think it does. Even in the short time I've known him, I can see how she mellows him but also lets him be himself without judgment."

I'm glad she gets it because I'm not sure I could have put it into words like she did. It's true, though. Brogan never felt good enough and his fun-loving, life-of-the-party personality wasn't exactly an act but more of a defense mechanism. With her, he's still that guy just without the need for validation and attention.

"What movie did you watch?" she asks.

This is probably the longest conversation we've ever had and I'm not sure why she's playing along so nicely after the way I've treated her.

"If you're going to trap me in here, you at least have to entertain me," she says like she's read my mind.

"Fair enough." I lean back against the dresser, facing her and crossing one ankle over the other. "We made it about twenty minutes into *Total Recall*."

"I've never seen it."

“Me either.”

“You didn’t finish it?”

“Nah. Didn’t feel like the kind of movie to watch alone.”

She studies me in a way that makes me self-conscious. I went to bed without a shirt and in only a pair of black sweats like I’ve done a million other times. Shorts or sweats depending on the time of year.

She’s seen me like this before but there’s something intimate about her checking me out while we’re alone in my room.

“Can I see your tattoos?”

“Uhhh...” I glance down at my left shoulder. “Sure.”

Standing, I step closer to her. Then realize that didn’t help much so I take a seat on the bed and angle my body so she has a better view. Holding still while she leans forward is difficult. I’ve spent all our interactions putting distance between us and now I wonder if that was as much about my reaction to her as my distrust of her hurting Brogan.

She lifts one hand and her fingers trace along the roses and then the mountains and jumps to the angel wings. I swallow as her nail grazes my skin, sending a tingle down my spine.

“The longer I look, the more I see,” she says, still staring at the ink that covers my shoulder and goes down my bicep. Her fingers move more confidently now. She points at one on the back of my arm. “Is this the sign for brother?”

“Yeah.” My voice comes out a little gruff.

“And the number eighteen is for your football number?”

“It was my mom’s birthday. All my brothers wear eighteen. Well, except Brogan because having a last name like Six sort of demands that be your lucky number.”

“It’s weird to think that could have been my last name,” she says.

“Sabrina Six,” I try it out. “Has a nice ring to it.”

Her light laughter is just loud enough to hear, but I feel the vibration with her fingers still touching me.

When she drops her hand, I miss the feeling.

“What’s the one on the inside of your right arm?” she asks, motioning with her head toward it. “I saw Brogan has one too.”

I hold out my right arm and look down at my newest tattoo with a smile. Five black circles in a line on my upper right forearm. “We all got them over the summer—me, Brogan, and the rest of my brothers. Five circles to

represent all of us.”

“And the fourth one is colored in because you’re the fourth brother?”

“That’s right. Brogan’s a few months older than me.”

“I love that. And I love that you guys have always included him.”

“He’s one of us.”

She studies me for a beat like she’s trying to get a better read on me. “He’s truly like a brother to you, isn’t he?”

“He is our brother,” I say automatically. “Hendrick, Knox, and Flynn all feel the same.”

When Brogan came to stay with us, my mom and three brothers all accepted him without question. He was already my best friend, and we spent a lot of time together anyway, so it wasn’t that big of a leap for him to become part of the family.

Besides, I saw what it was like for him. Even as a kid I wanted to shield him from that. The same way he protected me when I lost my hearing.

“It’s a really great thing you did for him, giving him a place to stay and a family.”

I lift one shoulder in a shrug. It never felt like I was extending him some courtesy. “I just did what he would have done for me.”

She nods slowly and then covers a small yawn.

“Are you tired?” I ask. Of course she is, it’s the middle of the night.

“Asthma attacks always leave me feeling like I could sleep for days but wired too. I usually recover by binge-watching TV, but it’s been a while since I had one in the middle of the night.”

“We could watch something if you want,” I offer.

“Do you usually stay up this late the night before a game?”

“No,” I admit. “But I told you, there’s no way I’m going to be able to sleep now.”

“I’m really sorry.”

“Stop apologizing.”

She nods. “So...*Total Recall*? Unless you want to watch something else.”

“No. That sounds great.” I pull it up on my laptop and we move up to the top of the bed with our backs resting against the headboard and the computer between us. I feel like I was the one who had an attack with the way my adrenaline is crashing.

I’m tired but fidgety and all too aware of every move, every breath she takes.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” I ask when I spot her inhaler still in her hand like she might be fixing to use it again.

“Yeah.” She sets it aside.

I don’t know if that makes me feel better or worse.

“Are you good with subtitles on?” I ask, hoping the movie calms down my nerves as much as hers.

“Yeah, of course.”

I’m grateful for the small accommodation. It saves me from turning it up so loud she’ll be running out of here.

It’s clear from the start of the movie that Sabrina is a person who talks through movies just like her brother. It’s reassuring in some ways and less awkward than sitting side by side on my bed in silence. And before long, I’m not thinking about her having another attack and instead enjoying her company.

She asks me my favorite movies, actors, TV shows; we even get into celebrity crushes. An hour into the movie, I’ve completely stopped watching the screen.

“My mom has a real thing for Keanu Reeves,” Sabrina says after we somehow get on the topic of favorite action movies. “I didn’t even know he did romantic comedies until I stumbled onto *The Lake House*.”

“Sandra Bullock.” I nod. “Saw that one.”

“You watched *The Lake House*?” she asks, clearly struggling to believe I would watch something that sappy.

“Oh yeah. I’ve seen everything Keanu. Did you see him in *The Replacements*?”

“No. Never heard of it.”

My jaw drops open. “You’re kidding me?”

“Nooo,” she drags out the word. “What’s it about?”

“Oh my gosh. It’s only one of the greatest football movies ever.” I sit forward, angling my body to face her, completely abandoning the screen.

She listens with rapt attention as I explain the story, including my favorite parts.

“Brogan and I must have watched it a hundred times.”

“I’ll have to check it out.”

“Tomorrow night after the game,” I say, then add, “If you want.”

“Yeah. That sounds fun.”

I realize then how much it sounds like a date. “I’ll ask Brogan. He’ll want

to see your reaction the first time you see it.”

She keeps smiling and nodding, then covers her mouth as she yawns.

“Finally tired?” I ask.

“Yeah, and I should probably let you sleep since you have a game tomorrow.”

“I don’t have to be to the field until late morning, so I can sleep in.” And if I’m honest, I still don’t want her to go, and now it has nothing to do with being worried about her asthma.

She moves off my bed, stands and walks to the door. I follow after her, stopping when she steps into the hallway.

“Thanks for tonight,” she says, smiling. “It almost felt like we were friends for a couple hours.”

I open my mouth with the intent of explaining, or trying to, why I’ve been such an asshole, but she holds up a hand. “It’s okay. I get it. You don’t need to say anything. I’m grateful for tonight, even if it was a temporary truce.”

“I’ve been a jerk,” I say. “Nothing excuses that.”

She doesn’t correct me.

“I’m sorry. I would like a chance to get to know you,” I say, then add, “If you still want that.”

Her chin tips down and back up in a nod.

“Truce?” I extend a hand.

Her gaze flicks down to my outstretched palm and she hesitates a beat. All things considered, I don’t blame her.

When her slender fingers glide against mine, I do my best to ignore the heat climbing up my arm. She gives my hand one quick squeeze and then backs away.

Before she gets out the door, I call for her, “Hey, wait.”

She pauses, hand on the door jamb as she glances back. “Yeah?”

“Congratulations on the studio.”

One side of her mouth lifts first, then she aims one of those real smiles I’ve only seen her give other people at me. “Thanks, Archer.”

SABRINA

The next morning, I feel like death warmed over, but for some reason I can't stop smiling. No, that's a lie. I know exactly why.

Archer Holland.

Before the asthma attack, I had planned to go to the studio today. But after everything my body went through last night, I decided to let myself sleep in instead.

When I walk out into the living area, London is seated at the dining room table.

"Hey," she says, looking up from her laptop screen. Her dark hair is pulled up into a messy bun on top of her head and she quirks one eyebrow at me. I'm sure I look as rough as I feel.

"Morning." My voice is tight and gruff.

"You mean, afternoon." She laughs softly. "Late night?"

"Kind of," I say, knowing she probably thinks I stayed out partying after the bar closed or something. "I had an asthma attack when I got home from work."

"Oh my gosh." Her eyes widen and she sits taller in her chair "Are you alright?"

"Yeah. I'm okay now. It didn't last too long, and I only had to take one puff from my inhaler."

"I don't even know what that means, but it sounds scary."

"It was. It is." That part never changes. No matter how prepared I am for

it, not being able to breathe is terrifying.

“You should have woken us up. I don’t know how we would have helped, but you shouldn’t go through that alone.”

“I didn’t.” I take a seat across from her after I’ve filled a mug with coffee and grabbed a banana from the bowl on the island. “Archer woke up and he stayed with me.”

Surprise registers on her face and then slowly morphs into a smile.

“That’s so...” she trails off like she can’t quite find the right word to describe the situation.

“Surprising?”

“I was going to say nice.”

“It was that too.” Nice. Fun. And sexy—though I already knew that.

I can feel my face heating the longer she stares at me. I glance down into my coffee and take a small sip. “Did you see him this morning? We were up until nearly sunrise. I hope he’s not feeling it as much as I am.”

“He was already gone when Brogan and I woke up, but he’ll be okay. During the season their schedule is so nuts, I think they thrive on adrenaline alone some days.”

Her words reassure me only slightly.

“Speaking of the game, you’re still coming with me tonight, right?” The eagerness in her expression flashes and then dims. “Or do you need to rest?”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” I say, reassuring her. “I’m okay. Just tired.”

“The energy of the stadium will cure that,” she promises.

I hope so. “What time do we need to leave?”

I slept through half the day and I still need a shower and to figure out what to wear tonight. I should probably call my doctor too and let him know about the attack. He’ll tell me what I already know. I should avoid the studio until it is cleaned out, but that isn’t really an option. Eleanor is renting me the space even cheaper than it was listed because I agreed to do the cleanup myself.

I can wait a day or two, but eventually I am going to have to go back. I’ll get a respirator, something I should have done initially, and take it slow. It might take me a little longer than planned to get the studio ready, but that’ll have to be okay.

After a very long shower, followed by several hours of overthinking my wardrobe, hairstyle, and makeup, London and I head to the game.

I’ve liked my brother’s fiancée since the moment I met her, but we

haven't spent much time alone. Within a few minutes sitting together at the game, though, I decide we're going to get along just fine. She orders popcorn and a hotdog, plus nachos. And she talks to me like we're long-lost friends. I thought she was quiet, but it turns out that is only true if you're comparing her to Brogan.

"Are you a football fan?" she asks over the noise as the guys take the field.

Brogan and Archer run out together. Brogan holds his helmet in one hand and lifts it to the crowd, pure elation splashed across his face. Archer wears his helmet, masking his expression, but it's clear his focus is completely on the field as opposed to the eighty-thousand people watching him. Their difference in personality is as evident here as it is at the apartment.

"Yeah. My dad watched the Mavericks growing up and we even came to a few games over the years. We all cried when they won the Super Bowl in 2019."

She lets out a small laugh. "You would fit right in with my family. I'm the only one that never got into it."

"And now you're engaged to one of them," I say, pointing out the irony.

"Life does work in mysterious ways." She smiles at me and then we both turn our attention to the field. The guys stretch and warm up. Brogan and Archer spend as much time standing around talking as they do preparing for the game, but there is a gravity in their stance and movements that tells me they're taking it seriously.

"Did you ever imagine having a brother that was a professional football player?" London asks while I'm trying not to notice how good Archer's arms look in his jersey. Now that I've seen his tattoos up close, I can picture the intricate details wrapped around his muscles.

"No. I wished for a sibling a lot, but I never could have imagined this," I tell her honestly.

I thought about it of course. I always knew that I was adopted and so I wondered like any adopted kid what my birth parents were like. Did I look like them? Did I get my habits or mannerisms from them? I never felt like I missed out. My mom and dad were all I knew, and I had a great childhood. They were loving and playful. They wanted kids so badly and by the time they finally gave up trying to have their own and adopted me, they were so beyond grateful that they never took a second for granted.

Or that's what they tell me. My dad said he took one look at me in my

little pink hospital hat, cute button nose, and just knew their family was finally complete.

“You just have the one sister?” I ask.

“Yeah.” She nods, smiling. “Sierra. She’s great. And for what it’s worth, I’m really glad you moved in so you could get to know Brogan better. He’s ecstatic. I can’t even tell you. He’s trying to play it cool and give you your space, but he’s really happy.”

My chest squeezes. I’ve been so worried about overstepping or infringing on his space and to hear that he’s been holding back for the same reasons, is comforting and also makes me feel silly for keeping my distance.

“I am too,” I tell her. “The more I learn about him, the happier I am to have found him.”

London takes a sip of her drink and fires another question. “And Archer? Are you also happy to have found him?”

With a small laugh, I glance out onto the field directly at the man in question. “Yet to be determined.”

“Fair.” A smile stretches across her face. “For what it’s worth, I can vouch for him generally being a good guy. I know he’s been a bit of a bear lately. He’s really protective of Brogan. I love him for it, but sometimes it makes him come across like...”

“An asshole?”

Her mouth pulls up at the corners. “So you have noticed?”

A laugh escapes from my lips. “It would be pretty hard to miss.”

She winces. “I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s okay. I understand him even if I don’t agree with his view of me.”

“Sounds like that might be changing. For both of you.”

I hope so. “I would never hurt Brogan intentionally.”

“I know.” London reaches over and squeezes my arm.

“The reason I left...” I trail off, voice wavering.

“Hey, you don’t owe me any explanation,” she says when it’s clear I’m struggling to finish the sentence.

I nod.

We fall quiet for a few beats until I find my voice again. I need her to understand, at least part of why I left.

“The thing is, I’ve had a lot of time to wrap my head around everything. How I was adopted but Brogan wasn’t. All my life I wondered why my birth

parents didn't want me."

"Oh, Sabrina." Her voice is soft and sympathetic.

I shake my head because it sounds sad, but I don't want her sympathy. "I would tell myself all sorts of stories about how they did it to give me a better life or they were spies who didn't want to endanger my life," I say with a small laugh. "But until I met Brogan, I couldn't stop wondering. Then after hearing some of what he went through, it made me realize how lucky I am. I already knew my parents were amazing, but the past year has really put things in perspective for me. So the thing is..." My throat is tight and burns as I swallow. "I am glad that Brogan has someone like Archer. Even if it means he hates me."

"He doesn't hate you. He's just worried. You're right, Brogan went through a lot. And Archer had a front-row seat. But he'll come around. In fact, I think he already is. He wouldn't stay up all night with just anyone."

Another laugh slips free. My emotions are all over the place. I can't decide if I'm going to laugh or cry. I'm glad I found Brogan when I did, but I wouldn't change my parents for anything. Imagining what he went through, wondering if I would have been as resilient as him, makes me appreciate my life so much.

And all that has me missing my parents in such a crushing way that I find myself getting to my feet quickly. "I just remembered I need to make a quick call."

"Oh." She moves her legs to let me pass, surprise and confusion in her expression. "Is everything okay? Do you want me to come with you?"

"No, no. I'm fine." I wave her off. "I'll just be a minute."

The stadium is crowded with people going up and down the stairs to get to their seats or hit the concession stand before the game starts.

When I get out to the concourse, I find a space against an empty wall and pull out my phone.

ME

Hey! Just checking in. How are you feeling?

In true mom fashion, she calls a few seconds later. I answer and put the phone up to my ear, pressing it tightly to help me hear over the noise.

"Hi! I'm at a football game so I'm not sure you're going to be able to

hear me,” I say by way of greeting.

“Hi.” My mother’s voice on the other end of the phone soothes the ache in my chest and I squeeze my eyes shut.

“Sabrina? Can you hear me?” she asks.

“Yeah.” I nod, swallowing thickly around the emotion clogging my throat. “I’m here. How are you feeling?”

“I’m feeling fine,” she says in a tone that tells me she’s smiling. “Don’t worry about me. Your dad is hovering around enough for the both of you.”

I hear him in the background but can’t quite make out his words. Dad doted on her even before she got sick. My parents are one of those couples that love each other so much you can see it in their every interaction. I thought that was just how all parents were until around junior high when my friends started commenting on how cute my parents were. I paid attention in a way I hadn’t before. Their parents seemed to like each other well enough but weren’t affectionate or sweet with each other the same way mine were always being so loving and considerate.

Other friends had parents who were divorced or separated, and then of course there were some whose parents were still together, but you’d never guess it from the way they treated each other so horribly. My parents were different. Still are. Sometimes it’s embarrassing, like the time I came home from school with two friends, and we walked in on my mom sitting on my dad’s lap while they were full-on making out.

But as I’ve gotten older, their love has become a standard. I want that. To be loved and cherished, even when I’m old and gray, and to love someone through all of life’s ups and downs.

“Are you still there?” Mom asks.

“Yeah. I’m here.” The tightness in my chest loosens enough to take a deep breath. “I’m glad Dad is hovering. Tell him I say hi.”

“Hi, pumpkin.” Dad’s voice is closer now.

“You’re on speaker,” Mom says.

“Yeah, I got that.” I smile, almost able to picture them huddled together with the phone between them.

“What are you up to tonight?” Dad asks. “Sounds like a party or are you at work?”

Most dads probably wouldn’t be thrilled that their daughter was dancing at a night club, and maybe he isn’t, but I tell them everything and they’ve always been supportive.

“I’m at a Mavericks game,” I say.

“Oh, you’re going to watch Brogan play?” Mom asks, but before I answer, Dad says, “Should be a good game tonight.”

“We have the game on the TV,” Mom confirms what I already suspected.

“I’ll keep an eye out for you,” Dad says.

“We’re sitting at the fifty-yard line behind the team.”

“Ooooh. Fancy,” Dad croons.

“Did Olivia go with you?” Mom asks.

“No, I’m with Brogan’s fiancée, London.” The concourse is starting to clear out and the National Anthem is playing.

“I better go,” I say quietly into the phone.

“All right, honey. Have fun.”

“I will.” I pause. “Love you guys.”

“We love you too,” Mom says, and I wait until she hangs up before I pull the phone away from my ear.

I take a deep breath, relaxing in a way I haven’t in days. Being back here away from them has been hard, but talking to them always makes me feel better.

My mood has lifted significantly by the time I make it back to my seat. The teams are both on the field and a few seconds have ticked down on the clock.

London smiles big. There’s a hint of concern as she takes me in, but she doesn’t question me and I’m grateful.

Seeing a football game in person is exciting. The atmosphere is like a big party and every time the Mavericks are on offense, the stadium cheers so loudly that it’s impossible not to get caught up in it all.

London brings both hands up to cup her mouth and yells, “Let’s go, Six!” as Brogan gets set at the line of scrimmage. Instinctively I find number six and then immediately look for number eighteen.

I finally locate him on the sideline. His helmet is on, and his back is to me, but I can practically feel the adrenaline coming off him in waves. Archer shifts his weight from side to side, holding the neck of his jersey with both hands.

I’m still watching him when the crowd around me gets to their feet, including London.

I glance to the field where the Mavericks have gained twenty yards. Brogan’s teammates are hitting him on the helmet and London is yelling for

him.

I clap along with the home crowd, but my gaze goes back to Archer. His profile is to me now and his body language is all pride and adoration. My insides go soft. The friendship they share is beautiful. I doubt they'd love me calling it that, but I can think of no better word.

London turns to me, breaking my focus from the field.

"I knew it was going to be a good game," she says. "Brogan wants to show off for his little sister."

That thought never occurred to me, but it makes me smile anyway.

But no matter how much I try to focus on Brogan, my gaze keeps going back to Archer. He finally takes the field halfway through the first quarter. His every movement is powerful and athletic. He doesn't get the ball, but I watch him just the same.

Last night he was a calming force when I was anxious and scared. It's the first attack I've had in a while. My asthma is generally under control. When I get really stressed it's the worst. And I guess moving, adjusting to three new roommates, undertaking a new career, mixed with the hundreds of layers of dust that I was surrounded by yesterday was too much for my lungs to handle.

As I watch Archer, I notice a lot of things. Like how his teammates and coaches are thoughtful of his hearing loss. It's subtle things that other people might not notice. Like how Brogan elbows him gently to get his attention or the quarterback speaks in the huddle looking directly at Archer. At one point, I even catch Tripp signing on the sideline with him.

By the end of the game, the Mavericks have extended their lead by twenty-one points and the crowd can't get enough.

"I forgot how exciting it is to be here in person!" I'm clapping along with everyone else as the Mavericks celebrate the win. Reporters and cameras flood the field to interview the players and capture photos.

Our phones buzz at the same time and a heartwarming smile pulls at my lips as I read it, then glance up at London.

Brogan sent a group text to Archer, London, and me. Two words. **Let's party!**



The atmosphere at the bar is similar to the stadium. Lots of Mavericks players are here and people huddle around them. Most give them space, but they hover close enough to watch and feel the excitement that radiates off them.

“What’d you think?” Brogan asks me as he leans one hip against the bar. Someone thrust a beer in his hand the moment he walked in, and he lifts it now to his lips, taking a generous drink.

“It was so much fun. It’s been years since I saw a game in person. And you were on fire tonight.”

His crooked smile pulls high, making him look almost boyish in his glee. “I’m so glad you came. It was the coolest looking over and seeing you and London in the crowd together.”

“And this one actually knows the game.” London slips in between me and Brogan. He wraps an arm around her and pulls her close.

“You do too. All those lessons with Merrick paid off.”

“Yeah, well, she knows more.”

“My dad is a big fan,” I tell them. “They were watching the game on TV tonight.”

“You should invite them to come sometime. I can get tickets or a box.” He pauses. “I never thought I’d have enough family to fill a box.”

London swivels her head and kisses his jaw.

His dazed expression softens, and he leans down to brush his lips over hers before saying to me, “But seriously, any time they want to come.”

It’s such a nice gesture, but I doubt my mom is going to be up for traveling any time soon, so I just smile and say, “Thank you.”

My gaze shifts as Archer comes into view. He came in with Brogan but got caught up talking to other people before I was able to say hello.

We lock eyes and I smile at him. He returns the gesture, but even with his lips curved up, he doesn’t look happy.

Someone nudges him and he looks away.

“Is Archer okay?” I ask Brogan.

“Yeah. Why?” He turns to find his friend.

“He looks kind of bummed.”

“Eh...He didn’t get the opportunities he was hoping for tonight.”

“Is his ankle bothering him?” London asks.

“No, nothing like that.” Brogan gives his head a small shake. “Coach has been trying some new groupings, that’s all. Since we got Graham this season,

he and Archer are often rotating to see who works better in different scenarios. Tonight, Graham was finding openings. Archer will bounce back. He's the better player, but some nights other guys are just hot, and Coach runs with it."

I glance back at Archer. His head is bowed slightly as he stands in a group of his teammates. He laughs at the same time everyone else does, but I can tell he doesn't really want to be here.

When he slips away and goes to the bar for another drink, I excuse myself from Brogan and London.

As I approach, I take in his defeated expression. For a guy whose team dominated tonight, he doesn't seem to be in the same party mood as the rest of the guys.

I slide into the space next to him at the bar. My arm brushes against his and goosebumps spread over my skin.

"Hey," I say when he glances over at me.

His expression immediately morphs, and he smiles as he stands a little taller. "Hey."

The bartender comes and takes his order, then looks to me.

"I'll have the same," I say.

We remain silent until we have fresh beers in hand.

"Congratulations on the game," I say, tipping my bottle to him.

"Thanks." He nods, smile slipping slightly. "I hope you know after Brogan's performance tonight, he's never going to let you skip another game."

"Yeah, he might have said something about that already." I laugh lightly.

Archer keeps smiling at me, but his features are all a little too tense for him to truly look happy.

"How are you feeling?" he asks. "Any more trouble today?"

"No. I'm feeling better. Thanks for last night. I really appreciate what you did."

"It was nothing."

"It wasn't nothing."

He lifts one shoulder and lets it fall in a small shrug.

Laughter behind us makes my stare shift. Archer glances over his shoulder and takes in the scene then looks back at me.

"You don't seem to be enjoying the win as much as your teammates," I point out.

“I’m glad we won. It was a great game. I’m just sulking. I’ll get over it.”
I laugh at his honesty. “Why are you sulking?”

He takes a drink of his beer, and I wait, not sure if he’ll answer me or not.

“Last season I missed ten games due to injuries. I’m finally back, but things have changed on the team.”

“You mean the Graham guy?”

His brows rise in surprise.

“You’re a fan of his?” He steps closer, gaze locked on my mouth. Even though I know he’s just trying to follow the conversation, my body comes alive with him standing so close and so intently focused on my face.

“No. I’ve never even heard of him before tonight.” I don’t even remember seeing a Graham on the field tonight. Then again, I was pretty focused on another player. The one standing in front of me.

The bartender sets two shot glasses in front of us. “Fireball. From your friend.” He tips his head to the right. I follow the motion to Tripp at the other end who raises his glass to us.

Archer picks up one and holds it out to me. I take it, our fingers brushing and sending another rush of warmth through me. He grabs the other shot glass and holds it up.

“I’m not keeping up with Tripp tonight,” I say, in case he thinks this is the first shot of many. Ugh. No way I can handle that again so soon.

“Good choice.”

“Should we cheers to something?” I ask.

“How about...” He thinks, stare still heavy on me. “To a clean slate.”

“To a clean slate,” I say and clink my glass against his.

He waits until I raise the glass to my lips before he tosses his back. The cinnamon-flavored liquor burns and I cough, placing a hand to my chest.

He grins at me but waits until I’ve recovered to ask, “Are you alright?”

“Yeah.” I rub at my sternum. My chest aches slightly from last night still.
“Little sore.”

His brows pinch together. “Did you go into the studio today?”

“No. I slept in. I need to get a respirator and maybe a couple air purifiers, and I didn’t have the time today.”

“A respirator? For what?”

“Oh, uh, the place is a little dirty.”

He raises one brow but doesn’t comment on that. “Sorry we didn’t get to watch *The Replacements* tonight.”

He remembered.

“Celebrating with your team is important.”

“Is that what I’m doing?”

“Well, no, not currently, but you could be.” I tip my head toward the table of his teammates and then take a step. He hesitates for a second before following me, though not all that excitedly.

We take seats at the end beside Brogan and London, but they’re in conversation with another couple so it feels like it’s just me and Archer.

Something about sitting here with him makes my pulse kick up a notch. Which is silly considering I was in his bedroom last night.

The neon bar lights dance across his face as he smiles at me. “Am I celebrating now?”

“You’re getting warmer. I think—” I start, but Archer reaches over to my chair and drags me closer.

“Sorry. I couldn’t see your lips as well with you so far away. The lighting in here isn’t great.”

My heart rate speeds up. “*Oh. Yeah, of course.*”

I swallow thickly as our knees bump.

“You were saying?” he prompts.

Right. I was. “*I think you might need to take a few more shots with Tripp for it to really be a celebration. At least that’s how I did it.*”

“I think I’d rather sit here and slowly drink my beer and —”

“*Sulk?*”

He grins and shakes his head slowly side to side. “And talk to you.”

ARCHER

I wasn't looking forward to coming to the bar tonight, but hanging out with Sabrina has been the best part of my day.

The game today didn't go how I wanted. Of course I'm happy the team won, but my contribution was so minimal, I don't even feel like I can celebrate.

I didn't expect to come in this season after spending most of last year on the sideline and have Coach rearrange all the plays for me, but I hoped that my efforts in practice and early games would show everyone what I'm capable of on the football field.

And if it had to be anyone playing well, why does it have to be Graham? Most of the team can't stand the guy, but no one is going to argue with the numbers. He's doing more for the team than I am, and I hate that so fucking much.

"Hey, I have an idea," I say when we fall quiet. Everyone around us is wrapped up in their own conversations and not paying us any attention.

"Okay. Let's hear it."

"Let's go see the studio."

"What?" The surprise of my suggestion registers on her face.

"I don't really want to be here, but I'm not ready to go home yet. And I'm curious."

"It isn't much to look at yet," she warns me.

"I don't care. I still want to see it."

She studies me closely like she's waiting for me to change my mind.

"*What about Brogan and London?*" she asks.

"They'll be heading out soon anyway."

She glances toward them and almost like it's on cue, Brogan checks the time on his phone.

"Come on." I push my chair back. "It'll be fun and then we can get pizza or something."

Sabrina stands but still looks unsure. "*You really want to go see the studio? Now?*"

"I do," I say, nodding. A smile curves up my lips. "And it'll drive Brogan nuts that I saw it first."

With a small laugh, she shakes her head and then closes the space between us.

My phone vibrates and I glance down, then turn the screen toward Sabrina so she can read the text.

BROGAN

London and I are heading out. You good?

Sabrina lets out a small laugh.

I tap out a quick reply.

ME

All good. Sabrina and I will catch a ride back later.

We take an Uber from the bar and only a few minutes later are pulling up in front of a busy stretch of street. There are lots of businesses in this area. Most are closed this late, but a couple restaurants and bars are still open, and people are walking up and down the street to get to them.

I thank the driver and get out of the car behind Sabrina. She digs out a set of keys and I hang back as she approaches the front door of a dark, nondescript building on the end of the block. My head tips back and I take in the broken windows. There's a thick layer of dirt covering the glass that looks like it's the only thing holding the other windows together.

"Here it is," she says, pushing the door open.

An uneasy feeling settles in my stomach as we walk in. She has her cell phone out with the flashlight on to illuminate the space as we go.

I flip a light switch on the wall, and nothing happens. "Is there

electricity?”

“Not yet. There hasn’t been a tenant in here in a while,” she says as I try the switch again anyway. I regret it when I pull my fingers back and they’re coated in something greasy.

Sabrina continues walking farther into the space. I follow closely behind so I can read her lips, and in case she falls through the floor or something. Which seems entirely possible considering what I’ve seen so far.

“I know it isn’t much to look at yet,” she says in a voice that feels far too bubbly for this dingy, dark, nearly condemned building. “But over here is where I’ll put the ballet barre, and the dance floor will continue all the way back here.” She moves around gracefully showing me her vision. All the while I listen, but I struggle to comprehend any of it because this place needs some serious work.

Her landlord is paying for new windows but everything else Sabrina agreed to cover so she could have a lower monthly rental payment. I don’t know if it was the best or worst deal of the century. This place needs new floors, at minimum, and it’ll probably take a power washer to get rid of the layers of dirt and grime that have built up while it sat empty.

“I’ll need to put up a wall somewhere to divide the space and think through the entryway and spaces for dancers to store their things and maybe a parent-viewing area.” The more she talks, the more animated she becomes. Her hands wave around, and she spins to look at whichever area she mentions, like she can see it already.

“So,” she says before I’ve figured out what the hell to say. Sabrina moves closer and shines her light so she can see me. “Oh, come on, it’s not that bad. It just needs a bit of work.”

I guess I didn’t mask my expression very well. Though to be fair, the fact she isn’t running away in horror says I’m hiding at least some of my feelings.

“A bit of work?” I ask as a bird, or maybe a bat, swoops down from the ceiling and disappears again somewhere up in the rafters.

“Okay, a lot of work but I can do it.”

“It might be easier to bulldoze over it and build it from scratch.” I turn in a circle and look a second time, hoping it’s not as bad as I initially thought. Nope. It’s bad.

“The bones are good, and I love the windows.” She walks over to one wall where an arch of windows looks out onto the street. Or it might if it weren’t covered in a century’s worth of dirt. It’s hard to imagine this place

cleaned up and not smelling like dead animals, but I reach for some optimism anyway.

“Six months or so of scrubbing and painting and airing the place out and it might not feel like the location of a horror film.”

She smiles, that dimple appearing on the left side of her mouth. “I want to be open before the first of the year.”

That gives her a few months, but it’s going to take every bit of it and then some. God, no wonder she had an asthma attack. I’ve only been in here a few minutes, and I feel like I’ve inhaled a year’s worth of dust.

“Do you already have a contractor?” I ask.

“It’s not that much work. My dad is handy, and I liked to help him when I was little.”

“*You’re* going to do all this yourself?”

She lifts one shoulder and shrugs. “I can’t afford to hire it out. The rent is a little cheaper than I budgeted, but I got a rough estimate for new flooring and installation and that alone takes up a good portion of the money I saved for improving the space.”

“Is it too late to get out of the lease?” I feel sick. Brogan isn’t going to just be upset I saw this place, he’s going to be pissed I let his sister walk into this place at night. I’m ninety-nine percent sure there’s a rotting dead corpse of some rat variety in here.

“I can do it,” she says again, lifting her chin slightly. “Just wait and see.”

SABRINA

Friday morning, I force myself to get up early, even though I'd like to sleep in for several more hours. We didn't get home until late last night after our trip to the studio. After, I lay awake in bed for hours, thinking of Archer, replaying pieces of our conversation and the way it felt to have his stare on my lips all night.

When I get to the studio, I put on my respirator and gloves and start the gross task of cleaning the walls. I can't stop thinking about Archer. I've been on actual dates that felt less intimate than talking with him at the bar.

I lift the respirator, resting it on top of my head, and bring a hand to my mouth as I get lost in my thoughts. The latex material on my hand tastes like dirt and cleaner.

"Yuck." I drop my hand quickly and go over to grab my water bottle and drown the nasty taste.

The sun streams through the broken windows of the studio. I left the door open this morning to let in some fresh air. I also bought two air purifiers, and I rented a heavy-duty vacuum to finish cleaning the floors and walls. But there is still a lot to do to get this place cleaned up and I've accepted that I might have to break it up over several days or even weeks.

My AirPods are in, music playing, as I stare around the room, devising a plan. The floors are swept of all the big stuff, but there's still a thick layer of dust and grime. Once I vacuum the cobwebs and dirt off the walls as well, I need to scrub the entire place from top to bottom.

It's overwhelming, but one step at a time. I pull the respirator back down and drag the vacuum over to the far wall and get started.

In no time, my arms start to feel heavy and I'm sweating. I really need a ladder because even with the extension on the vacuum, I can only reach halfway up the wall.

Something catches the corner of my eye, and I glance over to the open doorway, then jump and squeak in surprise.

Archer's lips pull into a smirk as I fumble to turn off the vacuum and remove my AirPods and respirator.

"Sorry if I startled you," he says, walking into the studio. "But I did say your name a few times."

His gaze roams over the space.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, moving in front of him like I'm trying to block him from seeing this place. I know he saw it last night, but it was dark. In the daylight, there's no hiding just how much work it needs.

Then I remember the state of *me*. I'm pretty sure my face is coated in the same dust and grime as behind me.

"I have the afternoon off and I thought I'd see if you wanted some help."

"Help?"

"Cleaning." He walks closer. He's in jeans and a white T-shirt and his hair is covered with a white Mavericks cap. It really isn't fair, him showing up here looking so good when I'm in old leggings and a baggy T-shirt.

His gaze drifts from my eyes to my mouth then he reaches up and runs his thumb along my cheek. My stomach flutters and my knees wobble. He's seriously throwing me off. I can't believe he's here.

"I'm a mess," I say. "Like everything else in here."

"It's not so bad."

"Gee thanks," I mutter.

His lips quirk with another smile. "I meant the place. It's not as bad as I remember."

"Oh. Right." I turn from him to look at it with fresh eyes. The vacuuming has helped, but there's a lot of wall and floor space left to go.

"I can sort of see it now." He steps up next to me. "I have to admit, last night while you were talking about your plans for this place, I was seriously doubting that you could turn it into anything but a landfill, but it's got good bones."

His words fill me with a weird sense of pride and hope.

“Really?”

“Yeah. I mean, you have to look *really* hard.” He squints and holds his hands up in front of him, thumb and pointer finger up like he’s framing a picture on the wall.

I shove at his arm playfully, leaving a dirt mark on his white shirt.
“Oops.”

“Guess I was asking for that by wearing white in here.”

“Pretty much.”

We stare at each other a beat. He’s unshaven and the scruff along his jaw is seriously sexy and distracting. He looks happier, lighter than last night too.

“Where do you want me?”

I’m not too proud to admit several delicious, dirty—and I don’t mean in the way this place is dirty—thoughts race through my mind before I realize he’s offering himself up to help me.

“You really want to clean this place on your afternoon off?”

“Yeah. The day after a game I can’t sit around, or I just end up running through every play, every mistake until I drive myself crazy. Plus, Brogan and London are cooped up in their room. You don’t want to be at the apartment right now. Even without my hearing aids, I can feel the vibration of the headboard banging against the wall.”

A small laugh slips from my lips.

“So I’m a last resort?” I ask, not offended in the least even if that were true. I know he could be doing a dozen different things – a dozen different women too. He might not have been in the mood to socialize last night, but I saw the looks he was getting from women all around the bar.

He smiles back freely.

“I’m not sure if I should feel honored or insulted.”

“Best not to examine it too hard.”

He’s here. Whatever the reason, I’m glad.

“You really want to clean?” I ask one more time to make sure because this place needs a lot of work and I’m not about to turn him away if he’s really offering.

“Put me to work, boss,” he says with a wink that I feel down to my toes.

After some minor swooning and gawking at his arm muscles, I get Archer set up with the vacuum. His height allows him to reach a lot higher than I could, and I follow behind him scrubbing with a mop.

He’s a lot faster than I was, too, which means I’m struggling to keep up

with him. He stops a few minutes in and pulls out his phone.

“Is it okay if I play some music?” he asks.

“Yeah, of course,” I say, but with the respirator on it’s muffled, so I pull it back up and repeat myself.

A few seconds later, familiar rock music fills the space.

“What is this?” I ask.

“Poison.”

“Should I know who that is?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “My mom was into it. She played a lot of rock at the bar.”

“The Topsy Rose?” I ask.

Archer’s lips twist in surprise.

“Brogan mentioned it. Several times.” And told me a lot of stories about Rose Holland, Archer’s mom and the woman who took him in when his parents kicked him out.

His grin widens. “Ah. It was called Rosie’s Place back then.”

“Your oldest brother runs it now?” I ask, though I’m fairly certain I remember all the details correctly.

“That’s right. Hendrick. He and his wife Jane own it. Brogan bartended there during our last year at Valley U.”

“I’ll bet he was a good bartender.”

Archer comes over and takes the mop from me. I don’t even protest. My arms are killing me.

“Of course he was. There isn’t a lot your brother isn’t good at.” He glances over his shoulder while he works on scrubbing the dirt from the wall.

I move to lean against the freshly cleaned area so he doesn’t have to crane to look at me while we continue talking.

“I’m starting to think I would have had a serious complex about being the less successful sibling if we’d grown up together.” I’m only half-teasing.

“Nah. He has this way about him of never making people feel less than. I should know. We’ve been best friends for as long as I can remember. He’s always been taller, smarter, more likable. He’s special, but if he knows it, he never acts like it.”

“You’re a good friend to him.”

“Only because he taught me how to be.”

My brows pinch together in confusion as I try to decipher his meaning.

“After I lost my hearing, I pretty much stopped making any effort to talk

to people. I felt awkward and weird. I wasn't very good at reading lips yet and I struggled to keep up in conversations, and just about any social situation was more effort than it was worth."

My heart squeezes for him. That had to have been a hard adjustment.

"I only kept playing football because of Brogan. He was this big, goofy kid. He was pretty much the same as he is now. He had more confidence than should be legal, would do anything to get a laugh, and was always at the center of attention."

I smile, imagining it. It's not hard to picture.

"He had this knack for including me without making me feel like I was some charity case. And once he included me, the other guys did too. He showed up to practice one day and had learned how to sign all the play names. I'm still not sure why he did it."

When he finishes talking, Archer's face takes on a slight blush like he's embarrassed he just shared so much. He clears his throat. "Anyway, Poison."

It takes me a second to remember we got on this topic from the music. I listen for a few seconds, nodding my head along. "I don't really like rock music."

He grabs at his chest and makes a wounded face as he sings, "Shot through the heart and you're to blame."

"Uh..."

"Never mind." He shakes his head. "Sabrina, Sabrina. You have so much to learn."

The way he says my name, even teasingly, makes goosebumps spread over my skin.

"I'm sorry," I say with a laugh. "It's hard to dance to unless you want to play air guitar and head bang."

"Never knock a good air guitar." The corners of his lips twitch and spread wide again.

Then we just stare at each other while the rock music continues to blare in the background.

He clears his throat and breaks eye contact first, then moves back to the vacuum. We work for the next hour in silence. Despite my arms aching and the sweat and dirt covering me from head to toe, it's not a bad time.

Archer is a hard worker, not that I'm all that surprised. But he works without complaint or stopping, except to empty out the vacuum. I give up on trying to keep up with him and instead enjoy watching him while I follow

behind scrubbing the walls. He sings along to nearly every song, some louder than others.

"You have a nice voice," I tell him at one point, and after that it takes a few songs before he resumes.

When he finally finishes, I'm grateful for an excuse to stop.

"Oh, thank goodness. I think my arms are going to fall off." I drop the mop and take a seat on an old wooden chair I found in the back office area.

Grinning, he takes off his hat and wipes his forehead with the sleeve of his shirt.

"Did you know the walls were blue?" he asks as he glances at the area that has been scrubbed clean.

"Not for long. Painting is next on my list." Although I may need a week or two to recover the use of my arms.

"What color?" he asks and then heads over to pick up the mop where I left it.

"I'm not sure yet. I think an off-white. I don't want to detract from the architecture, but maybe that's too boring."

"Nah, I can see it. I think a light, neutral color will really brighten up the place." He rinses out the dirty mop and then wets it again, continuing with the last wall.

I stare at him for a moment while he works. His back muscles flex and strain under the white material. He's turned his hat backward now and it gives him a boyish, playful look. My stomach flutters and my chest tightens in a way that has nothing to do with my asthma.

With some effort, I force myself back up and help him finish.

When we're done, Archer and I stand in the middle of the studio and turn in a circle together to take it all in. It's clean. I'm in shock.

"I can't believe we got all the walls done. I thought this was going to take me weeks." It would have without him.

"Now you don't have to wear this just to be in here." He taps at the respirator covering my nose and mouth again.

"Sorry," I say, lifting it. As considerate as I like to think I am, sometimes I still forget that he needs to read my lips.

"I could hear you fine," he says, "But I like your mouth. The way you talk is beautiful."

He makes a face, reconsidering his words. "That probably sounds creepy. It's just, some people don't really move their lips much when they speak and

it's harder for me, but I can read yours so well. I like it. It makes me more sure that I've understood you."

As compliments go, it's one of the better ones I've received.

"It's not creepy and I'm glad. It has to be annoying trying to learn every new person's habits and idiosyncrasies in order to communicate with them."

"It's like anything else. Some people you have better chemistry with."

"So you're saying we have good chemistry?" I don't know what makes me ask it. Maybe I just want confirmation that he feels this too. The past two days we've gone from despising each other to something else...something that has me thinking a lot about kissing him.

He grins, but says, "I'm saying that talking with you is nice."

He goes over to his phone and turns off the music, then pockets it.

"Thank you for today," I say.

"You're welcome."

"Are you heading out?"

"Yeah. I need a shower and food. What about you?"

"I have to work at the club."

"Bummer."

My stomach swoops low. Is that a bummer because he was hoping to hang out more?

"Yeah, especially since I no longer have feeling in my arms."

He steps closer and reaches out, both hands grabbing my upper arms and massaging gently.

I let out a little whimper and then a moan. Damn that feels good. His hands are rough and warm, and tingles spread through my body as he works out the aching muscles.

Yep. Definitely thinking about kissing him, but only if he never stops massaging my arms.

"Are you going back to the apartment first to get ready?" he asks. This close and with him touching me, his deep voice rumbles inside me.

I heard the question, but I'm struggling to answer. His eyes are lighter today, almost green in the sunlight instead of their usual hazel. And his finger is still rubbing soothing circles along my upper arms.

"No," I manage to say. "My friend Olivia lives close. I'm going to her house to get ready. She's having car trouble and needs a ride so it's just simpler. And I need to catch up with Greer anyway."

"Another friend of yours?"

“Sort of. Greer is Olivia’s daughter. She’s five. We became besties while I was crashing on their couch.”

His mouth pulls into that familiar half smile. “Being a good friend seems to run in the family.”

ARCHER

After a long practice, I shower and change at the apartment, then head out of my room to find Brogan. I don't know what the plan is for tonight yet, but I'm ready for a night out.

He's in the kitchen with a beer already in hand.

"What's the word?" I ask, running a hand through my still damp hair.

"Last minute party at Slade's house."

"For real?" A burst of excitement hits me. I was expecting another night at the bar or maybe a small party here, but I'm practically giddy at the thought of going to Slade's house. His parties are unreal. And just what I need.

At the end of last season, he moved from his massive penthouse apartment to a custom home that's even bigger. He's been a Maverick for many years, amassing a lot of friends in the area. The man doesn't know how to throw a small, simple party.

"Is London coming?"

"Yeah." He huffs a laugh. "Are you kidding? She's more excited than I am. She's getting ready now."

I grab a beer from the fridge and twist off the cap as my mood lifts. It's been a long week and I plan to cut loose tonight.

Is that cologne? Brogan sniffs the air around me and then a wide grin takes over his face.

I push him away playfully. "Fuck off."

I discreetly dip my head to my chest and check. Two spritzes, just like normal. He's fucking with me.

Brogan cackles. "No shade. You smell nice. Little sister, tell Archer he smells nice."

His gaze lifts over my shoulder and I swivel around to see Sabrina standing a few feet behind me. My pulse picks up speed. It's been almost a week since I helped her clean the studio. It's hard to say if it's our busy schedules that have kept us from seeing each other or the fact I've been subtly avoiding her.

Now I remember why.

My mouth goes dry as I take in her outfit. Short skirt, crop top. Her hair is in loose waves and her lips are coated in bright red lipstick. Fuck. I don't know where to look. She's fucking hot. I mean she's always hot, but tonight she's dressed to kill.

And I think I might be her first victim.

"You smell nice," she says, those red lips parting with a grin.

"Thanks," I say, the word coming out gruff. I clear my throat. "I didn't know you were coming too."

She walks farther into the kitchen. Her perfume or shampoo, something fruity, hits my nostrils. She smells nice too, but I don't say that. My gaze travels over her, taking in every detail. A gold bracelet wraps around her right wrist. A tiny charm dangles from it, too small for me to make out.

"Brogan didn't leave me any choice. He said parties at Slade's house were life-changing." She shoots a glance at her brother.

My brows inch up and a rough chuckle escapes. "I don't know if I'd go that far."

Wild, over the top, fun. All out madness. But maybe not life-changing.

"Don't let his blasé attitude dim your excitement," Brogan says, then he smirks. "And the cologne is good. Maybe you'll bring back a nice, young woman who can cheer you up. You're awfully broody lately. Turning into Knox right before my eyes."

I scoff. I have never been compared to Knox. My brother is sullen and moody or at least that's how he was before he met his fiancée, Avery.

But Brogan's not wrong that I've been a little on edge. It turns out it was a lot easier to function when Sabrina was the enemy. The more time I spend with her, the more I seem to forget that she's my best friend's little sister. He's turned his life upside down just to get to know her. I doubt he'd be

thrilled to know I've spent most of the last week fantasizing what she looks like naked.

If I'm broody it's because I'm in blue ball hell.

"It's true. When's the last time you hooked up?"

I clear my throat and glance at Sabrina, blatantly ignoring Brogan's question. "Are you sure you know what you're getting yourself into?"

"Oh, I'm not bothered. I could use some life-changing excitement."

Brogan's brows lift. "Not sure how I feel about that, little sister."

She laughs, the sound too quiet for me to hear, but the way it lights up her face does something to my stomach. That and the thought of her hooking up at a Slade party. More than one of my teammates, (honestly, probably all of them) would be happy to be the one to help her out with that.

We ride over to Slade's together. Brogan drives and I end up in the back seat with Sabrina. I'm starting to understand her quirks and tells, and right now she might be nervous.

I watch her as we pull up the long driveway. Her lips part as she stares out the window, taking in the big house lit up on the mountainside. It's quite a sight even for me and I've seen it dozens of times. It's the kind of house that screams opulence and extravagance and, above all, fun.

Brogan is beside himself, giddy about the party and Sabrina tagging along. It hits me again how much he wants to have a close relationship with her. He wants to know her, share experiences and plan for a future that includes her in his life. I want him to have that too. Which is why I decide to let go of the past and my anger at her for running off all those months ago and then coming back like nothing happened.

Most of it was already gone anyway. Since she moved in, she hasn't done anything to warrant my suspicion. The more I get to know her, the better I can see her beyond Brogan and the pain she caused him.

Basically, I'm choosing to believe she means well. If she's playing a long con, then I guess I'll just have to be as surprised as anyone else.

We're greeted by Tripp and Merrick as soon as we step into the kitchen.

"Me and you." Tripp points a finger at Brogan. "I need redemption at flip cup."

"Don't make me embarrass you so early in the night." One side of Brogan's mouth quirks up and he slings an arm across London's shoulders.

Tripp scoffs. "You had some sort of drunk super focus last time. I want to play while you're still sober."

“All right, if you want to start the night off with a beating, that’s on you.” Brogan flicks his gaze to me and Sabrina.

“Are you cool to stay with Arch for a bit?” he asks her.

“Sure,” she chirps up immediately. She’s clutching a bottle of red wine in her hands because she refused to show up empty-handed.

They depart, taking the chaos with them and leaving us standing around looking at each other.

“*You don’t have to babysit me,*” she says and signs.

“*And you don’t have to pity hang with me.*”

We stare at each other a beat longer, then both laugh.

“Do you want something to drink?” I ask her.

“Yeah. That would be great.”

She sets her wine on the counter with a dozen other bottles. Her gaze roams around the house like she’s taking in every detail. The marble staircase, the double ovens, and a refrigerator so big that Slade could probably fit inside it. The entire place is extravagant and beautiful.

I grab two beers from the fridge, then offer one to her. “Or I can mix you up something. Uncork the wine.”

“This is fine,” she says as she takes the beer. Her stare goes back to scanning all around us. There’s still a hint of nervous energy about her, but she looks excited too.

People are hanging in groups on the first floor. The back of the house is open to the outside. There isn’t a spot in this house that isn’t something to marvel at, but the roof really is the best part.

She glances back at me as I’m sliding the bottle cap in my pocket.

“Why do you do that?”

I freeze, pulling my hand out, cap free, like I’ve been caught. “Better than tossing it on the ground.”

Her stare narrows. “There’s obviously another reason. I noticed you do it, even at the apartment.”

I sigh. “It’s dumb.”

Someone shouts, “GET NAKED!” behind her and she doesn’t even glance back. She’s obviously not going to let this go.

“They get lost in recycling if you just toss them in separate from the bottle. If you put them in a steel can and recycle them that way, it’s better for the environment.” The back of my neck pricks with awareness as she stares at me like I have two heads.

“So you save them and then put them in a can?” she asks it slowly, like she’s certain she heard me wrong.

“Ummm...yes?”

Her lips curve into a smile.

“My mom did it at the bar and it stuck with me.”

I did warn her it was dumb. I tip my head toward the outside. “Let me show you around.”

Sabrina nods and moves with me, back to scoping out the house instead of me. It’s a big house, but there are still areas where it’s hard to push through the crowd. Cool fingers press against the back of my arm. I pause and look back and find Sabrina’s hand touching me. She gives me a shy smile as she fights to stick with me.

Reaching back with my other hand, I pull her arm through mine and draw her close so we won’t lose each other. Her fruity shampoo invades my nostrils, and the position has the back of my arm now flush against her chest. She gives me a grateful smile and I do my best to ignore the electric current zipping through me.

Instead of going straight up to the roof, I lead her to the wine cellar. I have a feeling she’ll get a kick out of it.

She doesn’t question me as I clearly go in the opposite direction of the party. Hanging a right before the steps, we walk down a dark hallway. She doesn’t need to keep holding on to me now, but neither of us lets go.

I push open the heavy, oak door for her. She peers past me, but doesn’t walk in.

“What is it?” Her sudden hesitancy makes me grin.

“You’ll see.” I step in and motion her forward.

The lights flicker on, illuminating the space. Wine bottles line the walls as far as you can see. A long table stretches out in the middle of the room with a big, crystal chandelier hanging above it. I don’t totally understand the table. I guess it’s for inviting over fifty of your wine-drinking friends.

I don’t hear the gasp that leaves her lips, but I see her mouth form an “o.”

“Right?” I ask.

“I can’t believe I brought him a bottle of wine,” she mumbles as she walks farther in. She lifts one hand like she’s going to run it over the glass case but then drops it. I stay where I am, watching her. She looks like she belongs in a place like this. That long red hair and that sexy as fuck outfit.

Brogan was right. I’ve been on way too long of a dry streak, and now the

one woman I absolutely shouldn't be lusting after is starring in my fantasies.

After we check out the wine cellar, we head outside. Here we're able to walk without pushing through a crowd, but Sabrina doesn't let go of my arm. I lead her to the stairs and up onto the roof, pausing when we reach the top.

Her expression is exactly what I hoped. Eyes wide, lips parted. The wind blows her hair around her face, and she doesn't even seem to notice.

"Woah," she says finally.

My grin widens. "Right?"

Her brown eyes stop scanning the yard and she turns her attention to me. "I have no other words. This is..."

"Yeah. I had the same reaction the first time I was here." We start walking again. I lead her over past the pool where two couples are playing chicken and others stand around watching. It's not uncommon for people to be making out all around these parties, but it's early enough that I only spot one.

A rookie on the team is going at it with some girl like they can't get enough of each other. She's on his lap, legs wrapped around his waist and arms draped over his neck, and his hands are splayed out along her back.

Sabrina takes it all in, still holding on to me as we walk. I stop near a large firepit. It's usually a popular spot at the end of the night, people sitting around and talking, but it's vacant now.

She looks at the empty seats, then turns to face me.

"Are you purposely keeping me away from the hot tub because Brogan told you to look out for me?" she asks with a hint of amusement.

"If you want life-changing, that's definitely the spot, but no." I jut my chin to motion behind her. "This is the best view on the property."

She glances over her shoulder like she's not sure if I'm being serious or not, then turns to fully take it in. Sabrina is quiet as she looks out to the mountains and the desert land. Saguaro cactus and ocotillo as far as the eye can see. "Thought you might want to see it before it's too dark."

We're quiet as we both stare out at the view. She's the first to speak.

"It's beautiful and also a little creepy."

"Creepy?"

"Yeah, the desert freaks me out. Rattlesnakes, bobcats, mountain lions."

"Don't forget the scorpions and bears."

Her eyes widen and she nods. "You're making my point for me. Are we safe up here? I mean..." Embarrassment creeps into her features. "Have you

ever seen any desert wildlife at one of his parties?”

A small chuckle escapes me. “Nah. They don’t want up on this roof any more than we want them here.”

She nods but doesn’t look that convinced.

“Stick with me. I’ll keep you safe.”



Sabrina and I continue around the party, stopping and talking every few minutes with teammates or friends. I introduce her, when necessary, though most of the guys have met her before. Everyone came out tonight. As I expected, no one wanted to miss a party at Slade’s house.

When I spot the host, I lead Sabrina over to him.

“Hey, man.” He holds out a hand and I clasp it in mine, then he pulls me toward him and speaks quietly. “I feel like I might have missed something important. You and Six’s sister?”

Slade’s gaze moves to Sabrina behind me.

“No.” I tell him with a shake of my head and free myself from his grasp. I angle my body, so I can see them both. She holds up a hand and wiggles her fingers.

“Sabrina, this is Slade. Mavericks’s center and owner of this rooftop palace.”

“We’ve met,” she says. “Nice to see you again. Your house is insane.”

“You should see the master bedroom. Waterbed, fireplace, and all the walls are one-way windows. What do you say, Hot Six?” He winks playfully.

“Waterbeds kind of freak me out. I get motion sickness easily. I think I’m gonna have to pass.”

Her response catches me off guard and somehow makes me like her even more. I bark out a laugh as Slade’s expression morphs from cocky to taken aback.

“Alright, I got you,” he says, holding up both hands defensively. She gives him a haughty smile in response. “Holland is a sexy motherfucker, but you can’t blame a guy for trying to steal you away from him.” He scowls at me. “You young bucks get all the ladies.”

I roll my eyes. “We’re just...roommates.”

Sabrina looks at me, cocking one brow slightly.

It's Slade's turn to laugh now.

"You come find me if this one doesn't get his head out of his ass." After tossing out that parting barb, Slade moves on to harass someone else.

Jesus. I need to drink faster. I chug what's left of my beer.

"Sorry. I started to say friend and then I panicked." I offer her a sheepish smile.

"We're friends-ish. Getting there anyway, I think."

I nod. I don't usually picture my friends naked, but minor detail.

"I need another drink. What about you?" I ask.

She glances down at the bottle and shakes it like she's forgotten it was in her hand. "I'm good."

I don't move.

"You don't have to watch over me."

"Yeah, sure." I scoff.

If it were possible to level me with the annoyed glare she's giving me, she would.

"Slade just propositioned you right in front of me," I remind her.

"I can handle myself."

I still don't budge, and she rolls her eyes.

"Yes, I would love another drink," she says in an overly dramatic fashion.

"I know that was sarcasm, but I don't care."

Her laughter isn't audible over all the other noise, but it spreads through my chest like wildfire anyway.

She walks with me back to the kitchen. In the short time I showed her the rooftop, the crowd inside has easily doubled. I grab two beers for myself and Sabrina. Just outside of the busy kitchen where people are coming and going for drinks, we pause.

"So what now?" she asks, leaning against the wall.

"Well, there are a lot of options."

"Like testing out Slade's waterbed?" she asks, batting her lashes innocently. I truly can't tell if she knows the effect she has on me and this is her idea of torture or if she's unaware of what it does to me.

"I thought they gave you motion sickness?"

"They do," she says. "Doesn't mean I'm not curious now."

Someone bumps me from behind and I step forward into Sabrina. One hand presses into the wall above her and the other holding my beer, rests against her hip. I stare down into her brown eyes. They're lined in black

tonight. She's always sexy but all done up like this, like she was hoping someone would notice and appreciate the extra effort, has me wanting to be that guy.

"Want me to take you back to Slade?" I barely recognize my own voice. It rumbles deep in my chest. My thumb lifts from around the can of beer and swipes gently across the bare skin just above her hip. The contact should remind me who she is and why this is a terrible idea, but all it does is make me want more.

Her pupils widen and I feel the chill that wracks her body. She shakes her head so small I almost miss the movement. Her long lashes flutter as her gaze drops to my mouth.

I'd blame it on the atmosphere and Slade's mention of his bed if I hadn't already been thinking how much I'd like to kiss her basically since the first time I saw her.

I wanted to hate-kiss her at first, sure, but I still wanted to kiss her.

I'm still staring at her slightly parted lips when Sabrina squeezes my forearm. The small contact sends a jolt of lust down my spine. Fuck. Is she thinking the same thing I am?

She does it again, this time a little harder, and her lips move. It takes a second for me to realize she's trying to tell me something. She tips her chin up and looks over my shoulder. I spin around. I'm usually better at knowing my surroundings, but to be honest, I forgot where the hell we even are.

Graham stands in front of me. His usual arrogant smirk on his lips.

"Sorry, Holland. I was yelling, but I guess you couldn't hear me." He waves a hand around his left ear while staring at mine. I resist the urge to flinch under his scrutiny or give him some asshole comeback, though plenty are on the tip of my tongue.

"What's up?" I ask. Sabrina has come to stand next to me and Graham isn't shy about sliding his attention to her.

"I don't think we've met," he says to her and holds a hand out. "Walker Graham."

"Sabrina," she says. The reluctance she shows before placing her hand in his makes me smile, though she does eventually.

"The infamous sister. I've heard a lot about you, but the guys failed to mention just how gorgeous you are."

I scoff. No one failed to mention it. In fact, most of the team has very much enjoyed giving Brogan shit over how hot his sister is.

Sabrina's smile is brittle as she pulls away from him.

I drop my hand to her waist to guide her away from this douchebag, but he sidesteps at the same time I do.

"Do you guys want to play a game? We were just rounding up a few more people for Truth or Drink."

"Seriously?" Sabrina asks like she expected a bunch of professional athletes to be above dumb drinking games.

The only thing that's changed about the parties as I've gotten older are the houses. From basements and garages in high school to frat houses in college and now mansions.

"We were just about to head outside." My fingers still linger against her soft skin.

"So were we. A little night air, a little booze, a little dirt-sharing among friends."

As if he's my friend.

"Aww, come on, Holland. It'll be fun. Unless you're afraid of looking bad." His head tilts to one side. "I gotta be honest, you're the last guy I'd expect to punk out on a friendly drinking game. Maybe you have more freaky skeletons in your closet than I thought."

Graham never outright insults me, but the hits land just shy of being downright pathetic.

I hold my hand out indicating he should lead the way. "Fine. Let's play."

SABRINA

This party is wild. Couples are making out in the hot tub, women are topless in the pool, and the booze and weed are floating around freely.

Everyone is having a great time. Everyone except Archer.

We settle into chairs on the rooftop patio. Walker Graham is an asshole, of that I'm certain. Archer hasn't always been nice to me, but I find myself very defensive of him as Walker raises his voice and leans forward when he asks, "Can you hear me okay or is the noise too much?"

"No need to shout and punish everyone else's eardrums," Archer says, grimacing.

"How do we play?" I ask as I scoot closer to Archer. "Is it just like truth or dare?"

He nods, gaze locking onto my mouth. He said he liked my mouth and now it's all I can think about. That and him placing his against mine.

"So I could just say drink and not have to admit to anything embarrassing?" I ask.

Archer's lips quirk into a smile. "Sure."

My stomach flips. This game has me transported right back to junior high and that was not a super fun time for me. I was awkward and taller than all the boys, which somehow made me undatable and unkissable.

"Want to do a test round?" he asks.

When I nod, he asks, "Truth or Drink?"

"Truth."

He stares at me for a beat. The light from the firepit in front of us dances across his features, and my body warms as much from him as the fire.

“Why did you leave last winter?”

I feel like the rug has been pulled out from under me. All those happy, flirty feelings are swept under said rug for good measure. I look away from him and take a long drink of my beer.

It’s not like I haven’t considered telling him and Brogan. I never meant for it to be some secret. It’s just, I don’t know if I’m ready to talk about it. Even speaking to my parents on the phone is still hard. Those months I spent back home with my mom were the scariest of my life. I thought I was going to lose her.

When I look back to Archer, disappointment is splashed over his features. I have the distinct feeling we’ve just taken about ten steps back from this friendly truce and mild flirting we’ve been doing. In an attempt to lighten the mood, I turn it back on him, “Truth or drink?”

His response isn’t immediate, but eventually he says, “Truth.”

“Have you ever made out with anyone in the hot tub over there?” I tip my head to where two guys have one girl sandwiched between them.

Archer’s gaze flicks in that direction but doesn’t linger before returning to me. “Yes.”

“Really?”

His lips flatten and the smallest of smiles pulls at the corners of his lips.

“I had you pegged for more of a private make out kind of guy.”

“With enough booze I’m a make out anywhere and everywhere kind of guy.”

My stomach flips with excitement. I think I’d like to see that version of Archer. This time when I smile at him, he returns the gesture.

“Truth or drink?” he asks. I steel myself for another hard question.

“Truth,” I say.

“Do *you* want to make out in the hot tub?”

“With you?” I ask, then my cheeks flame hot because now I’m certain that isn’t what he was asking.

“I was just trying to get a gauge on what you’re into. There are a lot of guys here that would love to get you in that hot tub. I’d say you’d have your pick.”

I can’t get a good read on him. Is he flirting with me now or just making an observation?

“And if I picked you?”

We stare at one another, neither blinking. The wind whips my hair around my face, but I don't make any move to tame it. Around us I'm vaguely aware that the game has started farther down the circle, but neither of us seems to care.

“There you two are!” Brogan says as he and London join us.

Brogan plops down next to me and flings an arm around my shoulders, snapping me out of the thoughts of kissing his best friend.

“Hey,” I say, blinking him into focus. He has a tipsy smile and flushed cheeks. Brogan squeezes me into his chest before letting go and sitting back.

“What have you two been up to?” he asks, then looks from me to Archer. His gaze travels to Walker and he gives us a quizzical look that I think begs the question, why the fuck are you sitting around with this guy?

“Not much.” Archer looks way less affected than I feel. My skin is on fire and my stomach continues to flip as he appears all cool and collected. I'm pretty sure he's into me. Either that or I imagined the chemistry crackling between us a few moments ago. But I can't gauge whether he wants to act on it.

London is still standing, but Brogan leans forward to wrap an arm around her waist and pull her down onto his lap. She squeals but falls into him with a smile.

“Not much?” Brogan asks. “It's a party, dude.”

He shakes his head then turns to me. “I'm sorry I left you with this guy. I told you he was in a slump.”

“We're playing Truth or Drink,” I say.

“Wow, it's been forever since I played that,” London says, excitement sparking in her eyes.

“Well, let's do it somewhere else,” Brogan suggests.

Yes, please.

Brogan and London stand, but before I can do the same, Archer leans closer to me.

I'm frozen as I wait for his next move. Our faces are inches apart and I can smell the beer on his breath and the cologne that still lingers on his skin.

“If you picked me, I'd consider myself the luckiest guy at this party,” he whispers. A shiver works its way down my spine and his words take a moment to register. By the time they do, he's standing.

“I need another drink. Anyone else?” Archer asks.

Brogan shakes his head. London too.

“We’ll see if we can find seats on the patio,” Brogan says as Archer starts for the house.

He can’t say something like that and just leave.

“I’ll come with you,” I say quickly and stand on shaky legs.

My face is on fire as I follow Archer. As soon as we reach the steps, I latch on to his arm so I don’t lose him. My heart is thumping rapidly. Neither of us speaks as he leads me inside and even as we pass by the kitchen.

There’s a hallway on either side of the massive living area. To the left, women are standing along the wall outside what I assume is a bathroom. Archer leads me to the right. The noise from the party fades with every step farther down the hall until he pulls me into a dark room at the end.

My eyes don’t have long to adjust. I spot a shelf with sneakers, but then Archer’s hands frame my face and nothing else seems important enough to look anywhere but at him.

He doesn’t kiss me yet, though his gaze drops to my lips. “Are you sure you want this?”

“Positive,” I whisper and nod just in case he couldn’t hear it over the pounding of my heart.

He takes my hand and places it on his left bicep. “If you want me to stop, squeeze twice.”

My brows tug together in confusion.

“In case you say it and I don’t hear you.”

It’s such an oddly sweet thing to be concerned with. Especially considering I’m ready to strip down and do some hot tub role-play.

“Sabrina?” The way he says my name makes goosebumps dot my arms.

“I got it, but please don’t stop.”

As he lunges for me, he lets out a low groan that I feel all the way to my toes. His lips are full and soft, and he doesn’t waste any time before sweeping his tongue into my mouth. No pretense of a chaste, innocent kiss, just a whole lot of pent-up longing. And I am here for it.

His hands frame my face, holding me in place—like I’m going anywhere. I’m exactly where I want to be. Archer uses his hold on me to turn me around and walk me backward until my shoulder blades slam against the door.

He pulls back, gaze dropping to my mouth before he brings his lips back to mine. His hands roam down to the sides of my neck. My pulse hammers against his touch and my body tingles as his lips and teeth graze the same

trail as his hands.

I push my hips into his, seeking friction to ease the throb between my legs. Archer groans against my collarbone and presses me harder against the door. He reaches down and hooks a hand around my left leg, lifting it off the ground until my knee rests against his hip. His thumb strokes the inside of my calf as his hard length grinds against my aching core.

“Archer.” His name is little more than a rasp from my lips, but he seeks out my gaze again. It hits me not for the first time how much time Archer spends worrying about everything going on around him. He doesn’t want to miss anything, but he’s constantly on edge that he won’t catch a word or signal because of his hearing loss.

I reach for him, pulling his mouth back to mine. I swallow his moan and instead of giving him one in return, I go with a tactile approach. I slide my hands under his shirt and drag my short nails across his skin. His muscles flex under my touch.

“Fuck, do that again.” He latches onto my neck and sucks while I scratch his chest and abs. He’s seriously cut with muscles that map across his upper body like an intricate design.

The hand he has on my leg inches higher up my thigh until he’s so close to his thumb brushing across my soaked panties that I hold my breath with anticipation.

My phone pings, sounding a lot louder than normal in the quiet, dark room. Archer freezes. I tell him to ignore it by moving into his hand. A whimper leaves my lips as his fingers finally brush against my core.

I don’t know how we got here, but I have never wanted someone’s hands on me more.

His phone goes off next. The vibration hums through his pocket to my hip. He says nothing as his fingers slide over me until he’s cupping my pussy through the lacy material.

He nips my bottom lip and then locks onto me with his dark hazel stare as he slips one finger under the side of my panties.

“Archer,” I say his name quietly, but he doesn’t miss it.

Or the loud ringing of my phone again.

“Should you check that?”

“Definitely not.” A shaky laugh leaves my lips. He’s making lazy circles an inch away from where I want his fingers most. He just keeps staring like he has all the time in the world until I pull my phone out. It stops ringing as I

say, "It's Brogan."

Archer's phone starts going off again.

"One guess who that is," he says. He lets out a small sigh as he slowly sets my leg back on the ground and then pulls out his phone. He taps out something, presumably a text to my brother, and then pockets it again.

"We're out of time, Cinderella." He tips my chin up with two fingers and presses another kiss to my mouth, humming like he's in pain as he pulls away.

He takes my hand then holds it up, staring at my wrist. "You lost your charm."

It takes me a second to realize what he's saying, but when I glance at my bracelet, the ballet slipper is gone.

"Oh." I'm still dazed from the kissing. Kissing I'd like to repeat. "It's okay. It was just an old, cheap bracelet."

He nods and starts to pull me back out of the room.

"Wait." I stop and grab on to his arm so he can't keep going. "That's it? What about us?"

"Right now, I need to get you back to Brogan. Your brother is worried someone has coerced you into a promiscuous situation."

My lips curve up slowly.

"This probably shouldn't have happened." He reaches forward and tucks my hair behind one ear. His fingers brush my cheek and along my jaw before they drop.

"Because of Brogan?"

"He is my best friend in the whole world. My brother in all the ways that matter."

"I get that, but..." I trail off because I'm not sure what argument I want to make. This isn't a big deal? I might die if you don't put your hands back underneath my skirt?

It occurs to me maybe he isn't quite so into this as I am. Maybe this was just a drunken party make out to get himself out of his dry slump.

"We should get back before he comes to find us." He starts again, but I reach for his arm and stop him. Again. He's wearing a cocky smirk. I'm sure I'm doing great things for his ego right now, literally stopping him from leaving my side. Then again, he's probably used to this. He has to be. Archer is seriously hot. His slump isn't for lack of willing participants.

He steps to me and brushes his lips over mine again, then steps back.

"I left because my mom is sick," I blurt out.

The smirk on his face slowly falls and his brows tug together.

"She was diagnosed with breast cancer in December. I went back home to be there for surgery and chemo." I drove her to doctor's appointments and kept her company when she was too sick to leave the house.

"Fuck, Sabrina. I'm sorry. I had no idea." His mouth pulls down at the corners as a flash of sympathy crosses his face.

I nod, smashing my lips together and swallowing around the emotion trying to clog my throat. I'm not sure why I'm telling him all this now. Maybe because I don't want him to think the worst of me anymore.

"They caught it early and it hadn't spread. She was lucky." *I* was lucky. I can't imagine not having her in my life. I need her too much still.

"Why didn't you tell Brogan?" he asks quietly.

"We'd just connected and were still getting to know one another. Also, I didn't think. I packed up my car and I drove home as soon as I found out."

He nods, giving me a smile that's filled with sympathy and understanding, but maybe still a little disappointment too. "I get that, but it's been months."

I hear the unspoken question. Why haven't I told him in the months since I found out?

"You're the first person I've told outside of Olivia. It just..." I swallow. "I was scared and talking about it made it all that more real. Then too much time went by, and I worried about how he'd react to me not telling him. And the truth is I still hate talking about it."

"I understand."

"You do?"

"Of course. Brogan will too. Family is everything to us. That's why he was so hurt. You're his family now too."

A pang of guilt hits me square in the chest.

So you don't think I'm a terrible human and an even worse sister? I sign the question instead of asking it out loud. Somewhere along the line, his opinion of me started to matter.

One side of his mouth quirks up. He shakes his head before he says, "No."

"Are you sure?"

"If I did, it'd be a whole lot easier." He stares hard at me. "Come on. We better go."

This time, I don't stop him.

ARCHER

The studio door is open and as I step closer, I catch the faint notes of music filtering out. None of that prepares me for the sight that greets me.

Sabrina is dancing in the middle of the space. With a broom clutched in both hands, she sings into one end like it's a microphone. A little girl with white-blond hair mimics her.

I'm standing and staring at the sight, warmth spreading through my chest, when another woman steps in front of me. I startle, both because I hadn't even noticed her and because of the glare she aims at me.

"Hi." I force a smile and try to appear friendly. The music is too loud for her to hear me, probably, so I lift my right hand in a wave for good measure.

The little girl catches one end of her broom on the floor and trips over it. The woman in front of me glances back and then hurries to her. Sabrina stops as well, her worry for the girl interrupted when she spots me standing in her studio. She smiles hesitantly at me, then checks on the girl, who is completely fine, except for her pink skirt, which is now covered in dirt.

"Sorry." Sabrina's lips move with the apology as she takes the broom from the girl, then moves to turn down the music.

I stay in my spot, just inside the door, until she looks back at me.

"Archer?" Surprise and what I think is excitement flashes over her features.

The woman who was glaring at me earlier stares at me with a much softer expression.

“Sorry,” she says. “I didn’t recognize you at first. I thought you were some creeper lurking on my daughter and best friend.”

I huff a short laugh. “Guess I shouldn’t lurk in doorways with a baseball cap.” I adjust the hat on my head to show more of my eyes.

Sabrina steps forward and waves toward the woman and girl. “This is Olivia and her daughter, Greer.”

“Nice to meet you both.”

“Are you Aunt Brina’s boyfriend?” Greer asks.

Her question catches me by surprise and gets another laugh out of me.

Sabrina blushes. “No, Archer is...” She trails off and flushes a deeper shade of red. “We’re roommates.”

Roommates who kissed the hell out of each other last night, but I guess telling that to a small child isn’t appropriate. It’s all I can think about though. Last night. This morning. Now. That was the best damn kiss of my life.

“We should get home,” Olivia says.

Greer whines. “I don’t want to go yet. Aunt Brina says I can come here and dance any time I want.”

Sabrina walks over and squats down in front of the girl, who looks like she’s on the verge of tears. “You are always welcome here, but only with your mom’s approval.”

Greer glances back at her mom. “Can I stay?”

“Not tonight, baby. You have school tomorrow and we still need to get groceries and finish folding laundry.”

Greer makes a face to show her disgust with the chores ahead, but she gets to her feet and walks to her mom.

Sabrina smooths a hand down the girl’s head. “How about when this place is all done, you and I have a sleepover. We’ll lay sleeping bags down on the floor and we can dance the night away?”

Greer’s eyes widen with excitement. “Cool. Can I Mom?”

Olivia nods. “Of course. That won’t be until she’s graduated anyway, right?” A smile tugs at her lips and Sabrina mocks surprise.

“Kidding,” Olivia says. She wraps one arm around her friend, hugging her close. “You’re doing a great job with this place already.”

“Thanks.” Sabrina beams with pride. “Later, bestie.”

“Bye!” Greer waves to her. She looks at me with suspicion. “Aunt Brina is pretty and kind.”

I nod.

“I thought boys liked girls who are pretty and kind so why aren’t you her boyfriend?”

“O-kay.” Olivia takes her daughter by the shoulders and guides her to the door, but she smirks at me as she passes by. “Smart kid.”

When they’re gone, Sabrina lets out a quiet chuckle. “Sorry about that.”

“I think I just got verbally attacked by a child.”

“Greer’s a riot.”

“Clearly.”

She stares at me like she’s waiting for an explanation on why I’m here, but I’m not ready to jump into it yet. When I say what I came here to say, things will be different.

“You’ve made some more progress.” I glance around as I walk farther into the studio. The floors are still dusty, but the lights are working and several cans of paint are stacked against one wall.

“Yeah. It’s coming along.” She stares at me until my skin pricks with unease. Damn. I’d really rather just kiss her again.

“What are you doing here, Archer?” she asks finally.

One side of my mouth pulls up at the sass in her tone, but as I face her and prepare to say the words, my lips fall back into a straight line.

“About last night,” I start and then run a hand along my jaw. Fuck. I should have gone with a text. Looking at her makes this harder. It makes me harder. Dammit. No. Focus, man.

She must sense where I’m going because her body language stiffens.

“It can’t happen again.”

“I see,” she says.

“You’re his sister. I can’t risk making this awkward or worse, doing something that would have you not wanting to be around at all. He’d never forgive me and frankly I’d never forgive myself. He needs you.”

“I’m not a teenage girl who’s going to hold a grudge if things don’t work out,” she says.

“I know. This isn’t about you. That little girl is right. I’m the dummy.”

She finally smiles at that.

“I just...can’t risk it.”

She nods slowly. There’s this small part of me that hoped she’d fight me on it, but she doesn’t, and the realization that this won’t ever happen makes something like disappointment settle like a rock in my gut.

“Thank you for being such a good friend to him.”

“He’s the best friend I’ve ever had.”

“So...friends?”

I huff another short laugh. “Yeah, I’d like that.”

She steps forward. Her red hair is pulled up into a ponytail and the end falls over one shoulder. Sabrina holds out her palm and I slide mine into it. Electricity zips up my arm and tingles through the rest of my body. I hold on longer than I should as her *friend*.

“One more thing,” I say, voice sounding like I chewed gravel. “The thing you told me about your mom.”

“I’m sorry I dropped that on you last night.” She scrunches up her face as she takes her hand back.

“No. I’m glad you told me. Really. I’ve been through that. I was younger and things were different, but I get it. I’m the one that should be sorry. I guess I wanted you to be a flake and a scam artist because that would make all this a lot easier.”

A small smile curves her lips.

“It’d sure as hell make it easier to stop thinking about kissing you.”

We stare at each other another beat before I manage to stop lusting after a woman I can’t have.

“Anyway.” I clear my throat. “When you’re ready, I think you should tell Brogan. In all the time we’ve been friends, he’s never let me down. He won’t let you down either. I promise.”



The rest of the week goes by faster than it should, considering all my free time is spent thinking about Sabrina. I guess lucky for me there isn’t a lot of free time. I let practice and workouts leading up to our Sunday game consume me. We get on the team plane Saturday late morning and I fall into my seat next to Brogan.

“What sort of flowers do you send to someone with a sick parent?” he asks.

My brows rise in question.

He lets his hand holding his phone drop to his thigh. “Sabrina’s mom is recovering from cancer treatments.”

I nod slowly.

“Yeah,” he says. “That’s why she left last winter. I feel like such an ass. I should have known something was up. I knew it wasn’t like her to just disappear.”

“White.”

His brows tug together.

“White roses for sympathy.”

“Right. Thanks.” He picks his phone back up and I settle into my seat, wondering a whole bunch of things and not sure how to ask any of them.

I start with “How’d you find out about her mom?”

“We went out to dinner last night. Some vegetarian place.” He makes a face that has my lips quirk into a smile. “That’s why the studio is so important to her too. Her mom is the one who taught her to dance.”

My chest tightens. I know it’s ridiculous, but I hate that she told him that and not me. I should be happy they’re talking and she’s sharing with him. And I am. I just wish she’d confided in me as well.

It’s a stupid thing to wish but that doesn’t seem to make me want it any less.



Sunday afternoon, the adrenaline kicks in as soon as we file into the locker room and start getting dressed for warmups.

Graham saunters over, knocking me on the arm before he speaks. “Yo, Holland. Ready for today?”

“Yeah. I’m ready.”

“Are you sure? Because I’m happy to jump in if it’s all too overwhelming for you.”

“Fuck off, Graham.” Brogan takes a step toward the guy, but I put out a hand to stop him.

Graham smirks. Fucker.

“Aww, come on. I’m just messing around. It’s a big night. Your first start. Nothing is better than the excitement at the start of the game. The lights, the music, the screams of the crowd. Though I guess those last two are wasted on you.”

“I swear to god, Graham.” Brogan’s jaw clenches as he stares my nemesis down.

He holds his hands up in surrender. “Just stating the obvious.”

Graham takes two steps back and then turns away. Brogan glowers a few seconds longer before he looks at me.

“You good?” he asks me.

“Yeah. He’s just trying to get in my head. And yours.”

“I hate that guy,” Brogan seethes.

“Everyone does.”

Despite my best efforts to keep Graham from getting to me, as I walk out onto the field, I can’t help but wonder what it’d be like to step out here and feel the full weight of the experience. I accepted my hearing loss a long time ago and the limitations that come with it, but there are times when I wish people didn’t have to make so many concessions for me.

When we get into the first huddle and Cody calls the play, then takes an extra second to say it directly to me, I feel that first crack in my armor.

The second crack comes in the second quarter when the batteries on my hearing aids go out. I swap them out as soon as the possession is over, but I’m rattled.

“What happened to them?” Brogan asks as I toss the old batteries into a side zipper of my bag.

“I just forgot,” I say. I always put fresh batteries in before a game. Always. For this exact reason. But today I was too preoccupied.

After that, the missed catch seems almost inevitable. Coach pulls me for the next possession and Graham’s smug smile as he takes my place haunts me for the rest of the night. Not even the win over Vegas helps my mood.

SABRINA

The apartment is quiet when I get home late Sunday night. I worked at the studio all day and then worked a shift at Lilac Lounge. TVs at the club showed the Mavericks game against Vegas. I wasn't able to watch much of it, but I kept up with the score and know they won.

Bass vibrates low from Archer's room as I head into mine. I grab clean clothes and make my way to the bathroom quietly. I shower fast and then am on my way back to my room when I notice the music has changed. Usually when he sleeps it stays on the same playlist. And instead of the usual rock music I've gotten used to, it's something slower with less bass. I pause in front of his door and listen.

I've just put my finger on the country twang when the door flies open. I jump back with a yelp. Archer's brows rise, but he plays off his surprise much cooler than I do. Then again, he's not creeping outside someone's door.

"Hi," I squeak out, heart still racing.

"Did you knock, and I didn't hear you?" he asks.

"That would be less embarrassing, but no. I was listening to your music."

His lips quirk into a smile.

"This trash?" He hikes one thumb over his shoulder.

"Why are you listening to it if it's trash?"

He holds up a finger and walks back toward his bed. He stops in front of his nightstand and picks up his hearing aids. He puts both in and turns down the music before turning back to me.

“I didn’t catch that last thing you said.”

“*I was just trying to ask why you were listening to country?*” I’m signing the words too, but he reaches out and stops my hands.

“I can hear you now.”

“*I don’t mind signing,*” I say and sign that as well.

“I like your voice.”

I have tried very hard not to think about Archer as the best kiss of my life since he politely told me that it couldn’t happen again, but when he says things like that, it’s really difficult.

The music flips to another song, this one even twangier and sappier than the last.

“Is this a cry for help?” I ask and motion with my hand, so he knows I mean the music.

His lips curve up at both corners. “I couldn’t sleep. Thought something with a slower beat might help.”

“And?”

“I was just going to get a glass of warm milk so clearly it isn’t working.”

“Warm milk?” A small giggle escapes. It’s so...surprising from this big, muscled guy.

His expression turns shy. “My mom used to make it for me when I was a kid. She’d sprinkle a little cinnamon on top.”

“That’s adorable.”

“Are you just getting home from work?” His gaze moves to take in my wet hair and bare feet.

“Yeah. I had to shower off the smell of Sour Apple Pucker and sweat.”

A deep chuckle shakes his chest, the sound barely audible.

“Want some milk?” he asks.

I nod and then we head to the kitchen. The recess lighting is on but otherwise we’re in the dark and Archer doesn’t flip on any other lights before he pulls a small saucepan onto the stove and then the milk from the fridge.

So that I don’t have to yell or worry about him being able to read my lips, I hop up onto the counter next to the stove. His gaze darts to my bare thighs before he focuses back on what he’s doing.

He pours the milk into the pan and turns on the burner. He pulls a wooden spoon from a drawer and then stirs slowly.

“Congrats on the game. It was on at the club,” I say.

A flicker of something passes over his expression before he attempts a

smile. “Thanks. How was work?”

“Sundays are usually pretty dead, but I don’t mind it.”

“Did you work at the studio today too?”

I nod. “I got one coat of paint up on one wall.” It’s going to take several coats and a lot more paint than I thought.

“That’s great.”

Archer stirs the milk continually, stopping after a couple of minutes and checking it by bringing the spoon to his mouth. Satisfied, he turns off the stove and pulls down two mugs from a cabinet. He carefully pours the milk, half in each, then grabs the cinnamon from the spice drawer.

He gives me a boyish grin as he sprinkles it on top of each drink. Once he sets down the cinnamon, he picks up his mug. I do the same.

“Cheers,” he says.

Laughing, I clink my mug against his. He watches as I bring it to my mouth. I sip carefully so I don’t burn my tongue. He takes a bigger gulp, still staring at me.

“It just tastes like warm milk,” I say, then laugh. “I don’t taste the cinnamon at all.”

He shakes more of the spice into my mug, but a little too heavy-handed because a huge clump falls into the top.

“Well, fuck,” he says. “Don’t drink that.”

“I could probably taste the cinnamon now.”

“Like Christmas in a cup.” He offers me his.

“No, I’m good.”

He leans against the counter next to me. He looks tired. Still hot, but like he has a lot on his mind.

“What else did your mom do when you couldn’t sleep?” I ask.

“She’d sing to me. Probably why I always fall asleep to music.” He cocks his head to the side like he’d just put that together for himself.

“What did she sing?”

I’ve missed talking with him. By unspoken agreement, we’ve given each other a wide berth, but the giddy sensation spreading through me tells me that the time apart hasn’t changed much. At least on my end.

“‘You Are My Sunshine’ or sometimes ‘When You Wish Upon A Star.’ Probably others too.”

“She sounds like a good mom.”

“The best,” he says without hesitation. “What about your parents?”

“I have always been a great sleeper,” I say, like it’s some big accomplishment. “My dad read to me at bedtime and my mom would sometimes just lie with me if I had a nightmare or I was sick.” As I think about it, my chest hurts. “I miss them.”

“Why did you come back to Lake City?” he asks.

“My mom made me.”

One of his dark brows quirks up. He’s moved closer. Or maybe I have. His forearm rests against my bare thigh.

“Before she got sick, moving here and opening my own studio is all I talked about. She never wanted me to move home in the first place, but I didn’t give her a choice. I had to be there. Maybe more for my own sanity than for hers. She is a fighter. So strong and stubborn, full of life.”

Archer hangs on my every word. I breathe in deep and let it out slowly.

“Anyway, the day she finished her last round of chemo and rang the bell, she turned to me and said, “Time to pack your bags.”

He laughs again and the sound vibrates through me.

“So here I am.”

“I’m glad,” he says. The air is thick with tension. His gaze drops to my mouth, and I will him to kiss me again, but he catches himself and stands tall, pulling away from me.

“I’m glad she’s doing better and I’m glad you’re here.”

“Thanks.”

He rinses out our mugs and then sets them in the dishwasher. I hop down from the counter.

“Can you sleep now?” I ask.

“I hope so.”

“Want me to sing to you?”

One side of his mouth lifts. “Nah. I’ve got Conway Twitty and Waylon Jennings.”

“Okay.”

We continue to stand in the kitchen, only a foot of distance between us. It would be so easy to touch him. A step forward to press myself against him. A slight lift onto my toes to brush my lips over his.

But he clears his throat, and it snaps me out of it, reminding me that he doesn’t want this or if he does, he’s not going to act on it.

“Good night,” I say, taking a step back.

ARCHER

My younger brother, Flynn, got called up from the minors today. It's a pretty big deal considering he was only drafted this summer. We all thought when he left college early, he'd spend a year or two getting experience at the next level before moving up again.

But the Twins starting pitcher has been struggling during the postseason and Flynn is the answer for them. At least they hope so. I do too.

The Mavericks are in Houston. We got here this afternoon and were able to get on the field for a quick practice. Our game is tomorrow afternoon, which means tonight Brogan and I are down at the hotel bar watching Flynn take the field in the bottom of the fifth inning.

"He looks like a grown ass man," Brogan says as number eighteen walks to the pitcher's mound.

"Knox said he grew another inch since the summer." I don't take my eyes off the screen as my little brother glances around the stadium of fans. Pride fills my chest. Barely twenty years old and making his major league debut.

"Fuck. I'm so nervous I don't know if I can watch." Brogan takes another drink of his beer.

Those same nerves bounce around inside me, but I don't look away. It's unreal. I can still remember him playing little league. He was always the most athletic of us. Brogan likes to tease him that all our talents rubbed off on him over the years, but the truth is Flynn is just on another level than the rest of us. The sky is the limit for what he'll achieve.

If him standing on the pitcher's mound at a postseason game isn't proof of that, I don't know what is.

The first pitch is outside but fast enough that the announcers comment on it.

"Wooweee. That is going to be hard to hit if he can keep it straight," one says. Then they must pull up his bio because they start talking about him being an Arizona native who played one year of college ball before being drafted by the Twins.

I hear each fact like it isn't my baby brother and still it fills me with awe.

The catcher tosses the ball back to Flynn, who spins it in his hand as he returns to position. He adjusts his hat and continues palming the ball as he communicates with the catcher. He shakes off the first signal and then nods. He winds up and throws another cannon.

The umpire yells, "Striike!"

The crowd screams for him and Brogan finally lets out a whoosh of air.

"Fuck yeah, baby Holland."

"He hates when you call him that," I say, but a grin tugs at my lips.

"That's what big brothers are for."

I chuckle and nod. He's right. Hendrick and Knox tortured me plenty, but they were always cheering me on too.

Flynn throws for three innings. It's not a bad start, but when he gives up three base hits in a row and then walks the next batter, he looks rattled for the first time all night.

His next pitch is wild, and the Twins call a timeout. The coach walks out to the mound. Flynn's gaze is downcast as the coach speaks to him. We all know it's coming, but it's still disappointing when they bring out another pitcher.

"Nice job." Brogan claps for him like Flynn can hear or see him. But fuck it, I join in, and we clap as our youngest brother leaves the field.

We finish watching the game, but it's not as interesting to us without Flynn. The Twins hang on for a win, tying up the series.

"Think he'll get another shot?" I ask as we walk up to our rooms.

"Definitely," Brogan says as he flashes the key card in front of the lock. It beeps and turns green before he pushes it open. "See you in the morning."

In my own room, I toss my hat on the dresser and remove my shirt. I do the same with my shoes and jeans. As I climb into bed, I fire off another text to the brothers' chat congratulating Flynn.

I wish I could have been there. Knox made it and that seemed fitting since he was the one that stepped into the father role the most for Flynn. After Mom died, our lives changed a lot. Dad, who was never around that much to start with, came around even less. For a while it was often enough that we could manage in his absence.

But then Hendrick graduated high school and went off to play college ball, and without Dad, or our oldest brother, Knox had to step up.

I was still young enough that I didn't quite understand then the sacrifices he had to make, but looking back now I'm not sure how he did it without resenting us all.

Our group chat is already blowing up when I pull out my phone. I smile at the newest group name for our brother chat, which is most definitely Brogan's doing.

Flynn Holland Fan Club

BROGAN

BABY HOLLAND! You were on fire!

HENDRICK

Great job, bro. Everyone at the bar was cheering you on!

KNOX

You should have heard the crowd. They love him already.

BROGAN

Of course they do. He is my brother after all.

KNOX

He's all our brother. 🤔

BROGAN

But he gets his swag from me.

ME

I'm speechless. Incredible job, little bro.

KNOX

Brogan, let's be honest, he's way cooler than you were at his age.

I close out of the group as a notification pops up for our front door at the apartment. I click on it and watch as Sabrina digs out her key. She's carrying

several big grocery bags that nearly cover her face and make it hard for her to let herself in. The sight of her makes me smile. Especially when she lets out a cute growl of frustration.

ME

Need a hand?

It's several minutes before she replies. She's managed to make it inside so I can't see her anymore.

SABRINA

I made it. Barely. By the way, if I had said yes, were you going to magically appear? I thought you were in Texas.

ME

I am.

SABRINA

Yes, I need a hand.

ME

Well, fuck. I didn't think this through. Might take me a few minutes to get there.

SABRINA

My ice cream would have melted before you arrived to save the day.

ME

That would be a real tragedy.

SABRINA

Don't I know it. I have big plans that include eating ice cream in the bathtub and blasting pop music on your big, fancy speakers.

A rough chuckle leaves my lips. I have a real vivid picture of her all sudsy, singing along to some girly bop music that makes my smile widen and my dick come to attention. Ever since that kiss, I spend half my time thinking about her and the other half reminding myself I shouldn't.

I tap a few buttons on my phone and wait. It's less than thirty seconds before another text pops up.

SABRINA

Oh my gosh. Did you do that or is there a magical pop music fairy?

ME

No idea what you're talking about.

Before I reply, I switch the playlist to rock.

SABRINA

Now I know it's you.

ME

Nice and relaxing, right?

SABRINA

Yeah. I just need to find my AirPods.

Chuckling, I turn it back for her.

ME

Enjoy your night.

I'm just about asleep when my phone lights up. I almost don't look, assuming it's my brothers still yapping, but something has me grabbing it from the nightstand and opening the text.

SABRINA

Actually, will you turn it back to the other playlist? I think your rock music is growing on me.

SABRINA

“I think I need to go on a date or something,” I confess to Olivia Friday afternoon. She and Greer came by after school and I’m taking a much-needed break from painting.

“What about hottie roommate?” Olivia asks.

I glare at her until she laughs.

“What? You can’t tell me about late night talks over warm milk and not expect me to daydream about your future babies.”

“Woah there. The only baby I need is Greer.”

Olivia looks over to where her daughter is dancing in the middle of the studio. “She is perfect.”

Even amidst the empty place, so far from how I imagine the final product, it makes my insides all soft and gooey to see a kid dancing here. Carefree and full of life and fun. That’s what I want the studio to be.

“So will you help me?” I ask my best friend.

“You want me to set you up or something?” She arches one brow at me.

My stomach twists at the idea of a blind date, but I try to keep an open mind. “Do you know anyone?”

“If I did, I’d be keeping him to myself. All my dates are from apps and they’re awful.”

“Then let’s go out together.” My eyes widen with excitement. I am not great at going out and meeting people, but with Olivia, I’m certain we can manage to meet a couple of decent guys. She’s beautiful and interesting, and

I can just nod along and hope someone falls in love with my wonderful personality while I also do nothing but smile and nod.

“Or we could stay in, order takeout, and binge watch TV.” She nods back enthusiastically.

“We are going out,” I say definitively. Her objection to the idea has me more sure that it’s exactly what both of us need.

She snarls like I’ve suggested something truly awful.

“Greer is with her grandparents this weekend, right?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“Then it’s perfect. We’re both off Saturday night. Date night with my bestie.”

“I was planning to deep clean the refrigerator.”

“That can be our backup plan if it goes badly.”

She still looks like she wants to protest but with a sigh she says, “I am going to hold you to that.”

I reach out my hand and hold up my pinky finger. She links hers to mine and it’s all settled.



When I get home later that evening, Brogan is in the kitchen dumping protein powder into a large shaker cup.

“Hey,” I say, dropping my keys onto the counter. “Where is everyone?”

And by everyone, I mean Archer. I’ve only seen him once since they got back from Texas. The only reason I know he’s been home at all is because when I get home from the club, I can hear his music going.

“Hey, little sister.” Brogan smiles at me as he puts the top on the cup and shakes it. “London is helping a friend hang some art pieces, which I’m pretty sure means they’re drinking wine and talking about me, and Archer was still at the stadium when I left. What have you been up to?”

“I was at the studio.”

“How’s that coming?”

“Good,” I say. “Slow. There’s still a lot of cosmetic things to do, but the windows are all fixed finally.”

“Nice.” He smiles and nods his head. “I can’t wait to see it.”

“Yeah, you should come by sometime. I can show you around and then

we could grab lunch or something. There's so many cute places in that area."

"For sure." The way his face lights up reminds me of what London said. How Brogan is playing it cool with me. It isn't that I doubted it, but there are moments like this where I get glimpses of how much he wants us to be close. I want that too.

"Perfect. Let me know when you're free."

"I will." He leans back against the counter. "What are you doing this weekend?"

"I'm working at Lilac Lounge tonight, and tomorrow, I'm going out with Olivia to find my next boyfriend."

His brows rise and I giggle, having appropriately surprised him.

"Tell me more. I didn't realize girls just decided something like this. And where does one go to pick out a boyfriend?" His eyes twinkle with amusement as he waits for my answer.

"Somewhere nice. Not too pretentious but somewhere men dress up in something other than T-shirts and ball caps." Which I realize as I say it is basically how he and Archer dress all the time. "No offense."

"None taken. I rock a basic tee."

I laugh, but when I think of Archer, I realize he's probably right. Neither of them needs to worry about dressing up to impress anyone.

"A hat on the other hand...my head is too big. And I have great hair."

"If women had your confidence, we'd rule the world."

He keeps right on grinning at me.

"So, somewhere nice-ish," he says, playing along.

"Right, but no clubs or bars because those are primarily where people go to hook up."

"Which leaves?"

"I don't know," I say honestly. "Bowling?"

He nods along. "Or paintball?"

"I don't look cute in goggles."

He huffs another laugh. "Movie theater?"

"Most people don't like it when I talk during a movie."

"Me either," he says in a voice that tells me he's also been shushed many times. "I don't get it."

"Same."

We're smiling at each other, and it feels good, like this is a moment we might have shared a million other times if we'd grown up together.

“We’ll probably end up going out to eat or something,” I say, returning to mine and Olivia’s plans for tomorrow.

“There’s that new bar and grill with pickleball courts.”

I make a face. “Sweating off my makeup isn’t my idea of fun either.”

“You don’t have to play. Grab dinner and drinks and just hang out. It’s always packed, and guys love to show off for pretty women.”

I consider it. I don’t have any better ideas.

“Thanks.” I stand from the stool. “I better get ready for work. See you later?”

With his schedule, I see less of him than I thought I would living here.

“We have a home game Sunday,” he says as he pushes away from the counter.

“I already told London I’d be her plus one.”

His lips pull apart in a wide smile.

I start for my room and then stop and turn back. “Thank you for the flowers.”

After I confided in him about my mom being sick last winter, he sent a dozen white roses.

“Oh.” His face takes on a slight blush. “It was nothing.”

“It was nice, and it meant a lot.”

He continues to look embarrassed but also a little proud.

“If you want, I’d love to introduce you to my parents sometime.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I mean, if that’s not too weird.” It feels like every move one of us makes is careful and too considerate. Someday I hope that won’t be the case. “It might be a while before they’re up to traveling, but I know they’d love to meet the brother I’ve been talking about for almost a year.”

“Nah. It wouldn’t be weird,” he says. “I’d like to meet them too.”



On Saturday night, I force a still reluctant Olivia out of the house, and we take an Uber to Sweet Pickle. It’s only been open a month, but it has become a hot spot for twenty and thirty-somethings.

Inside tables are spaced around one half of the restaurant and a long bar stretches across the other side. There are cutesy signs with pickleball rules

and sayings all over the wall, but somehow it doesn't feel cheesy. Maybe it's the women in dresses holding cocktails like they're spectators at the US Open that keeps it from looking like a dive. The pickleball courts are outside, with a patio, providing more seating to eat, drink, or watch people playing.

"I feel like I need eye protection," Olivia says after we grab drinks and head outside.

It's nice out. The nights are finally starting to feel like fall. We manage to snag a seat at a bar top table that looks straight onto the courts.

Thankfully the guys playing on the closest court seem to be well in control of their balls.

"You know, it doesn't escape my notice that you have an in with professional football players and instead we're here watching guys play pickleball."

"Pickleball is the fastest growing sport," I tell her. I read it when I was looking up the restaurant.

"Uh-huh." She pulls something up on her phone and then sets it down in front of me. It's a picture of Archer at practice splashed across the team's social media page. He's in football pants, but his pads up top are gone and so is his helmet. His hair is sweaty and slicked back, and a navy T-shirt stretches across his chest. I've seen it before. In fact, I'm the one who sent it to her.

I swallow. Hard. Then take another sip of my wine before I say, "You bitch."

She laughs as she takes her phone back. "Any more late-night run-ins?"

"No. Nothing. He's been gone all week."

"You should have kissed him again."

"We're *friends*," I enunciate the word carefully.

"Uh huh..." She unlocks her phone and flashes me the photo one more time.

"Delete that picture right now."

"You sent it to me."

"I was trying to be a good friend by sharing all that sweaty hotness with you. I didn't think you were going to use it to torture me."

"First of all, he's not really my type. Undeniably hot, yes, but I prefer someone a little more down to earth."

"Archer is very down to earth," I say, feeling myself get defensive.

"Honey, he is a professional football player. I'm sure he's very nice but he does not live in the same world that we do. Or that I do. You are literally

living in their world now.”

“They aren’t that different. Taller and more muscular.”

“More money.”

“Yeah, but they spend it on typical guy stuff like sneakers and electronics.”

She snorts a laugh. “All I’m saying is my type is more practical. No guy living his best life making millions of dollars and who can get literally any woman he wants, is interested in a twenty-three-year-old single mom.”

“They should be so lucky. Greer is amazing and you are a fucking catch.” My whole body heats at the thought of anyone looking over my best friend and her daughter as less than.

“Someday, maybe, when they’re on their second marriages and already have a couple of kids of their own.” She waves one hand in the air and looks off into the distance like she’s seeing her future.

We giggle, but I sense the sadness in her even as she jokes.

“You are going to find someone great who adores you and Greer.”

She nods but her expression isn’t completely convinced. “Do you think I’m going to find him here?”

We spend the next hour drinking and talking and scoping out the single men. When two guys approach us, we’ve had just enough wine to entertain the idea. Though pretty much immediately I’m not feeling the guy that’s obviously picked me in this foursome.

Billy is twenty-five, in sales, and a big fan of pickleball, his new sports car, and talking about himself. When he starts telling me about how he’s just started brewing his own beer in his garage, I glance at Olivia.

She seems to be faring better with her guy, Rob. He has his arm around the back of her chair and stares down at her adoringly. As he should. Though I can’t help but judge him slightly for his friend, who is literally boring me to sleep.

I take another large gulp of wine and pry my eyes open wide as I try to feign interest, but an entire group of women standing by our table all turn toward the doors and shriek with the kind of excitement that has me wondering what’s going on.

It only takes a few seconds to figure out why and who they’re looking at. My brother is here. My brother and *his best friend*.

I make eye contact with Archer across the bar and my face warms. Damn. A week without seeing him in person and I forgot. Sure, sweaty practice

Archer is hot but this one walking toward me makes my pulse race.

He elbows Brogan and then nods his head toward me. I drop my gaze and fall back, pretending like I'm listening intently to Billy. If he noticed at all that my attention had wavered, it doesn't seem to bother him because he's still droning on about his brewing process. Also, I'll admit I might be a bad date. I couldn't seem to focus on a single thing Billy said even before Archer walked in.

As discreetly as possible, I nudge Olivia under the table. She tears her gaze away from Rob and looks at me. I widen my eyes and ever so slightly tip my head toward where I last saw Archer and Brogan. She isn't getting it at all.

I'm just about to attempt to mouth it out to her when her stare lifts to someone behind me and a huge grin takes over her face. That and the goosebumps racing up my arms tells me that Archer is close.

"Hey, sorry to interrupt," Brogan says.

I swivel around and face the guys, sending Brogan a questioning look. "Hi!"

I stand, because frankly I don't know what else to do. I hug Brogan and then because it feels awkward not to, I step to Archer.

His hands wrap around my back, and I nuzzle against his chest for a brief moment. He smells good, that cologne that Brogan likes to tease him about really does something for me.

"What are you guys doing here?" I ask. I glance back at the table. Billy looks unimpressed by the two guys in front of me. In fact, I'd say he's a little pissed.

"I heard you were on a date." Brogan puffs out his chest slightly. He's already a big guy so it's not exactly necessary. In fact, it looks like he's about to bust out of his white T-shirt.

"I wouldn't call it a—" I start, but my brother pulls out the chair I'd just been sitting in and moves it closer to Billy before taking a seat.

"Hi. I'm Brogan." He tips his head in my general direction. "Sabrina's older brother."

"What is happening?" I whisper to Archer as we watch on.

"It's hard to explain." Archer is fighting a smile, and I feel my own lips pull up to mirror his.

"Try," I say firmly.

Brogan and Billy are now shaking hands and by the way that Billy is

wincing, I'd say Brogan is squeezing his fingers unnecessarily hard.

"He's looking out for you. Being a protective big brother."

A startled laugh escapes my lips. "What?"

Archer turns to me, and I forget all about Billy and his possibly crushed finger bones. "You told him you were going out to find a boyfriend. What'd you expect him to do?"

"Nothing," I answer honestly, then it hits me. "Oh my god. Is he here to try and scare off my date?"

Archer looks at me in a way that tells me I'm finally getting warmer. "He's your brother. He thinks it's his responsibility."

I should maybe be mad, but it's hilarious, considering how glad I am to be away from Billy. All I can do is laugh.

"We just want to make sure he knows that if he hurts you, we'll kick his ass."

"We'll?"

An arrogant smirk tugs up one side of his mouth.

"This is unnecessary."

He keeps smiling as he brushes past me. He finds a free chair nearby and pulls it to sit on the other side of Billy, who now looks like he wants to be anywhere but here.

I head to the bar for another glass of wine. I have a feeling I'm going to need it. Olivia joins me a minute later.

"Don't say it," I warn her. She's smiling a little too smugly.

"I wasn't going to say a word."

We watch as Brogan and Archer talk with Billy. Rob's joined in on their conversation and while it looks friendly enough, I can't imagine what they're saying.

Olivia is quiet for as long as she can stand it when she says, "Okay, but if I were going to say something, it's just that I think it's sweet."

"Sweet that they marched in here to ruin what could have been a great first date?"

"Oh please, you're only here entertaining other guys because you have it bad for your hottie roommate and you don't want to admit it."

I glower at her. "I liked you better when you weren't saying a word."

She laughs then we both fall quiet.

"Brogan's a pretty good guy," she says more sincerely.

"Yeah, he is. Slightly clueless but there's something very endearing about

him.”

“And Archer.”

I shoot her another glare that absolutely does not intimidate her.

“He’s not clueless, honey, and neither are you. He wants you. You want him.”

“He friend-zoned me.”

“Only because of his relationship with Brogan.” A slow smile spreads across her face. “It just occurred to me; Brogan marched in here to threaten your date when the guy he should be threatening is his best friend.”

Groaning, I let my head fall forward.

“Ah, cheer up. This night was very entertaining.” She drains the rest of her glass and sets it on the bar, then takes a step away, shifting her purse to her shoulder.

“Where are you going?” I ask.

“To deep clean my fridge.” She leans forward and kisses me on the cheek. “Call me later and let me know how this all ends.”

ARCHER

“Poor Billy,” Sabrina says as Brogan tells the story (not for the first time) of how we crashed her date earlier this week.

“We showed up in our T-shirts and baseball caps and showed him what was up.”

“Wait!” Sabrina shrieks. “You wore that on purpose?”

Brogan’s lips curl up and he nods.

“I should have known,” she says, but her tone doesn’t hold any malice.

We had an afternoon game today and came to the bar near the apartment after, where we’ve had a chill night. A lot of the guys have already left, but a small group of us remains at a table in the back.

“You weren’t even into the guy,” Brogan says.

Sabrina looks to London with her mouth agape.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to tell him but look at this face.” She grabs Brogan’s jaw and purses her lips at him.

“Fine. Good riddance Billy, but what if I had been with some great guy and you waltzed in and scared him off?” Sabrina demands, but she’s smiling so big it’s easy to see she isn’t that upset.

Brogan shakes his head adamantly. “The right guy isn’t going to run like that.”

“Uh...I would.” Tripp raises his hand. “If her brother’s crazy, then she probably is too.”

Sabrina scowls playfully across the table. “Great. I’m doomed.”

Everyone falls into quiet laughter. Sabrina sits back in her chair and glances over at me.

I take a drink of my beer and force my gaze away from her. I shouldn't be so glad that we scared off her date or to find out that she wasn't into him. Even thinking about her bringing some other dude home has me irrationally jealous and possessive. I'd help Brogan scare off every guy in a hundred-mile radius if I thought she wouldn't turn around and kick our asses in return.

Brogan wants to feel like he's looking out for her, doing what any big brother would, and I get that. It's why I rolled into the restaurant with him and detailed out for Billy all the bones I'd break if he treated Sabrina like anything but the queen she is. However, she's not a damsel in distress.

She doesn't really need us to look out for her, but there's something about her independence and self-sufficiency that makes me want to take care of her even more. Because she's my best friend's sister. And because I can't stop thinking about her.

I spent all week at the stadium, working out, getting in extra skill sessions, watching game film, and avoiding the apartment where I might run into her. And still, she occupied most of my thoughts.

I get up quietly from the table and head to the bar.

The bartender tips his head to me as I approach. I lift my empty bottle and set it down on the bar. He returns a moment later with a fresh beer.

"Thanks," I say, then turn to stare back at the table I just left.

Sabrina sits with her profile to me. She's leaning forward with one elbow propped up on the table, smiling at something someone's said. Her red hair is down tonight and falls over her shoulders. She's in jean shorts and a black tank top. She isn't dressed to draw attention but somehow my stare is drawn to her anyway.

A woman steps up to my peripheral.

"Nice game today," she says.

I tear my gaze away from the woman I most definitely should not be staring at and angle my body toward the one at my side. "Thank you."

I'm always a little uneasy when women approach me these days. Every once in a while, there's someone who is only interested in me because of what they think it'll do for them: party invites, tickets, pictures for social media, introductions to other players. It's a trip.

"I'm not a stalker or anything. I just happened to be at the game for a work thing and I recognized you guys when you came in."

I nod my understanding. “A work thing?”

“I’m in sales and my boss was entertaining clients in one of the sky boxes. I think I was supposed to be there to convince them to sign with us, but I got a little distracted by the game.”

I feel my mouth pulling up at one corner. It was a good game today. Not that I had much of a part in it. After my last two less than stellar performances, Graham has continued to be Coach’s go-to guy. I really hate him, but he’s putting up better numbers than I am so I can’t really blame Coach.

“I’m Sharee by the way.” She extends one hand to me.

“Archer,” I say as I take it and give it a small squeeze.

Sharee is a pretty woman. Dark skin and hair and curvy in all the right places. There probably isn’t a guy in this bar who wouldn’t be flattered she approached them. But I can’t help but compare her to Sabrina. Stupid things that don’t even matter. She’s not as tall. I’d have to bend down uncomfortably to kiss her. Her perfume is different. Not unpleasant but she doesn’t smell like Sabrina. I’ve officially lost my damn mind.

“Hey. There you are. I was looking for you.” The woman I seem to be obsessed with comes out of nowhere. She wraps an arm around my shoulders and that fruity scent has me instantly leaning closer to her. Somewhere in the back of my mind I’m aware that she’s being friendlier and touchier than normal, but I’m enjoying it too much to think about it too hard.

“I’m so sorry,” Sharee says. “I didn’t know you were with someone.”

“Oh, he’s not.” Sabrina shakes her head and smiles at the other woman. “I’m his brother’s sister.”

The woman thinks for a moment. “Doesn’t that make *you* his sister?”

“No.” Sabrina shakes her head. “But I see how you could think that.”

Sabrina sticks out her hand. “I’m Sabrina.”

“Sharee.”

The two shake quickly and when Sabrina pulls her hand back, she steps in front of me with her arms crossed. Surprise makes my lips curl up. What the hell is she up to?

Sabrina turns her face to look back at me as she asks, “What are your intentions with Archer?”

I bark out a laugh.

“Umm...” Sharee looks at me and smiles like we’re in on the joke together but then glances at Sabrina who has not faltered in her body

language.

“Oh, you’re serious,” Sharee says and clears her throat. “Well, I think he’s cute so worst-case scenario, some flirting over drinks and best-case scenario, he asks for my number.”

“That is a very good answer.” Sabrina’s brows crease as she lets her arms drop to her sides. She turns to fully face me. “Women are a lot harder to scare off than men.”

I chuckle softly. Fuck, she’s funny. And pretty. And dammit I am trying hard not to go there but my brain and my body are both in sync on this. I want my best friend’s sister.

Sabrina turns back to Sharee and says something I don’t quite catch because my attention is on her ass and her red hair falling down her back and how if I stepped up just a few inches closer, she’d be pressed against me.

This time when Sabrina faces me, she doesn’t have that same sassy and fun look on her face. Maybe it’s hopeful thinking but I swear there’s a hint of sadness in her expression.

She takes a step to leave. “Have fun, roomie.”



I buy Sharee a drink and we sit and chat for a while. She’s nice, beautiful, and leaves no room for doubt that she’s into me.

“I should get home,” she says, checking the time on her phone. “I really enjoyed talking to you.”

“Yeah, same.” And I did. It kept my mind off Sabrina, if only for a short while.

I scan the bar now looking for her. The last time I saw her, she was playing pool with Tripp. I find my teammate talking to a woman I don’t recognize, but no Sabrina. Dammit. I stand, panic works its way through my veins. Did she leave already? Brogan and London are still here. Surely, they wouldn’t have let her go on her own or at the very least made sure she got home safe.

Sharee stands and places some cash in the tip jar. “I’d invite you to come with me, but something tells me this isn’t happening.”

She doesn’t look pissed, more resigned, which somehow makes me feel like an asshole.

“I really did enjoy talking to you, but there’s someone else.”

“A girlfriend?”

“No, nothing like that but I still wouldn’t feel right about it.”

She nods, scanning my face like she’s checking for the sincerity in my words. “Thanks for the drink. Good luck with the rest of the season.”

I tip my head to her as she walks off. I catch Tripp’s eye across the bar, and he lifts both brows in question as he takes in the scene. I ignore the ‘you’re an idiot’ look he gives me as I walk around the bar looking for Sabrina. I pull out my phone to text her, but I don’t know what to say.

Stopping by Brogan, I place one hand on his shoulder.

“Bestie!” he calls, eyes droopy from alcohol and mouth in a lazy smile.

London laughs. “I think it’s time to get you home.”

He looks at me. “She wants to get me naked.”

She laughs, not bothering to deny it. “Come on, big guy. Uber will be here in five. Are you coming Archer?”

“Maybe. Have you seen...” My words trail off as I finally spot her. Sabrina is standing with Slade on the far side of the bar. He has his phone out and they stare at it together, standing close. Too close.

“Grab Sabrina and meet us outside.” London pats me on the chest as she and Brogan move past me toward the front of the bar.

The panic in my chest eases, but my heart rate continues to race as I make my way to Sabrina. Her laugh registers when I get close.

Slade drapes one big, beefy arm over her shoulders. An arm I’d like to break. Slade is a big dude. I’d only get one move on him before he’d pummel me into the ground, but that doesn’t stop me from imagining him bleeding and begging me for mercy. I like Slade. Or I used to.

They’re still huddled together when Slade looks over the top of Sabrina’s head and sees me approaching. He smiles but whatever expression he sees on my face has that smile faltering.

He moves his arm from Sabrina. “You good, Holland?”

Slightly better now that he’s not touching her.

Sabrina swivels around as he speaks. Her brows pinch together.

“Fine,” I say in a gruff tone I barely recognize. “Brogan and London are waiting on us.”

“Oh. Okay.” She glances at Slade. “You have to send me that.”

Slade is still looking from me to her, like he’s trying to decipher what’s happening. “Sure, babydoll. Put your number in my phone.”

My veins fill with fire, and this time when I narrow my gaze at Slade, he smirks back. He fucking smirks. Fucker knows exactly how much he's pissing me off. And he also knows I'm not about to call him on it.

"There you go." Sabrina hands his phone back. "See you later."

"For sure." He wraps his arms around her, still aiming that knowing smirk at me. "Always a highlight."

She leans into his embrace. "Aww that's so nice."

"Are you sure you don't want to come check out my waterbed?"

She laughs and swats at his big beefy chest playfully. "You're such a flirt."

He holds on a little too long.

"Okay, okay. We gotta go." I reach for Sabrina. My fingers curl around her wrist and she comes to me easily with a light tug. I don't let go.

"Have a nice night," Slade says while wiggling his fingers in a wave. I flip him off over my head as I pull Sabrina away from him.

She says something, but I'm looking forward and don't quite make out her words. She pulls free from my hold on her wrist but latches onto my bicep to walk with me. When we get outside, Brogan and London are nowhere to be seen. I glance all around for the Uber and then check my phone to see if either of them sent a text.

Sabrina's fingers tap on my inner arm to get my attention. When I look at her, she asks, "Are you okay?"

"Honestly?"

She nods, expression morphing into concern.

"No. I don't think I am." My gaze drops to her lips. "Are you into Slade?"

"What?" That concern turns to amusement. "No. Did you not hear me turn down his waterbed for the second time?"

"You were laughing and standing close."

"Yeah," she says the word slowly. "He was showing me funny cat videos."

"Cat videos?"

"I like cats."

I stare at her, studying her expression. "That's it? You don't want to hook up with Slade?"

"What is happening right now?" She laughs lightly. "Brogan and London were being all cutesy and you were occupied so I hung out with your

teammates. Why are you being so weird?”

“Fuck.” I run a hand through my hair.

“You’re jealous right now. Is that what this is?” She laughs louder and I cut a glare to her that doesn’t frighten her in the least.

A car pulls up in front of us and the front passenger window rolls down. Brogan sticks his head out. “Get in, losers, we’re going to get tacos.”

SABRINA

Archer, London, and I pile into the back of the Uber with me wedged between them. Brogan is up front. My left side buzzes with awareness in all the spots Archer touches. London scoots forward to put her hands on Brogan's shoulders.

It gives me a little more space, but I don't move.

The driver is a young guy, obviously thrilled that he got the call to pick us up and doesn't bat an eye when Brogan turns up his music until the bass thumps under my ass.

Archer shifts beside me. His right hand goes around behind me, and I suck in a breath as his fingers dip in the gap between the waist of my jeans and my back. He hums along with the music and the vibration sends another shot of pleasure through me.

We pull up to the Jack in the Box drive-thru and the music lowers so we can order.

"Do you want anything?" Brogan turns around to ask us.

I shake my head. Archer does the same. Brogan orders enough tacos for all of us anyway. He hands back two bags of food, and London snatches them and digs in immediately.

"Sorry," she says after she accidentally elbows me in the arm.

"A girl has to have room to eat," I say with a stilted chuckle. I inch closer to Archer to make more room for her and also because I'll take any excuse to touch more of him. His hand still rests just under the band of my jeans and

now I'm nearly sitting on his lap.

His thumb strokes back and forth along my skin and I can feel his breath on my neck. His lips ghost over my skin and I swallow hard.

The ride seems to take forever, but in actuality, it's only five minutes before we pull up to the curb outside of the apartment. Brogan is the first out and he opens London's door. It takes them a moment to gather all the trash with them both being tipsy. Archer and I wait for them, even though we could go out his door.

My legs are shaky as I finally step out onto the sidewalk. The four of us walk up to our place. Brogan is carrying London piggyback and they're in their own little happy, drunken bubble.

"They're cute," I say as Archer falls into step beside me.

"What did you say?" he asks, then his gaze drops to my mouth.

"*They're cute*," I repeat and this time I sign the words as well.

He glances ahead and then nods. "You say that now but in about fifteen minutes you're not going to think so."

"Why not?" I ask.

"You'll see." He takes my hand like it's the most natural thing in the world. By the time we make it through the front door, London and Brogan are shut up in their room. The apartment is dark, except for the moonlight streaming through the living room windows.

Archer uses our joined hands to tug me close to him. My breasts brush against his chest and I tip my head back slightly to meet his gaze.

"I thought you didn't want this." My pulse is racing, and the words come out husky. The whole ride home felt like foreplay.

"I was trying to do the decent thing. This could be messy, and Brogan might actually kick my ass."

I slide my hands up over his shoulders and tangle my fingers in the hair at the nape of his neck. He reaches up and takes off his hat, tossing it to the counter.

"You're his best friend. He's not going to kick your ass."

"I'm not so sure about that, but I'm willing to risk it." He leans down and takes my legs out from underneath me. I clutch at his shoulders as he lifts me up and holds me against him as he stalks toward his room.

He kicks the door shut behind us. My heart flutters as we lock eyes. We stare a beat as if we're both deciding whether or not we're really going to do this, then lunge at the same time. I sigh into his mouth as his lips slant over

mine. Archer kisses me like he's been counting the seconds since the last time we did this.

My arms tighten around his neck, and I press into him. He steps up to the bed and lays me down on it gently.

"Sorry it's not a waterbed."

I giggle and sit up so that when he climbs over me, I can kiss him again. He pushes me back onto the bed, covering me with his body. My legs fall open to make room for him. His dick is hard and pushes against my center.

We both groan. I nip at his bottom lip, and he presses against me. Archer pulls back with the sexiest moan. He inches down my body, staring up at me with hooded eyes. He lifts up my shirt and places a kiss on my stomach. Then his hands work on unbuttoning my jeans and pulling them down.

He stares down at me like he's in no rush, but I'm struggling to keep still. Every nerve ending begs for relief. Archer moves back up over me and kisses me again, this time more tenderly.

Noise somewhere in the apartment catches my attention and I break the kiss to listen.

"What's wrong?" Archer asks.

"Do you hear that?"

He arches a brow, and I roll my eyes.

"It sounds like..." I trail off as I realize exactly what I'm hearing. Archer grins like he already knew, even without actually hearing it. Brogan and London are doing the same thing we are. Except not so quietly. "They're so loud."

"Not so cute now, huh?" He pulls his phone out of his pocket and taps a few buttons. Music starts to play through his speakers.

"Had to be rock, huh?" I ask, not bothering to yell because I know he's watching my lips.

"I could switch it to Ariana if you'd like."

"I don't care what you play, just kiss me again."

A cocky smirk tips up one side of his mouth. He sets his phone on the nightstand and then lies in front of me. My hand strokes up and down his arm. He has really great forearms.

"Remember to squeeze twice if you want me to stop."

I've barely deciphered his meaning when he's pulling my knee over his hip. His fingers drift around to my back and then lazily lower over my panties until they settle on the back of my thigh.

“Sabrina?”

“Squeeze twice. Got it. Now kiss me.”

He chuckles but lowers his mouth to mine. He’s not tender or soft this time. His tongue sweeps in and tangles with mine. He captures my moans and hums in reply. Archer pulls me on top of him so that I’m straddling his lap. His hands roam up my thighs to my waist, over my arms and shoulders and to the side of my neck.

“Fuck, you’re sexy.”

My skin heats with the compliment. I slide my hands underneath his shirt and drag them over his cut stomach and chest. “Right back at ya.”

I tug on the material, and he sits up enough for me to remove it. My gaze drops to his tattoos, and I run a finger over a tiny saguaro cactus woven into the rest of his tattoos. Something about it makes me smile.

But not for long because Archer is doing his own exploring, and it feels divine. One hand stays on the side of my neck and the other lowers until he’s teasing my skin high up on my thigh with his deliciously warm and rough fingers.

Slowly he moves higher until the tips of his fingers brush against my panties. A shaky breath leaves my lips. He pauses like he thinks I’m unsure.

“Don’t stop. Whatever is the opposite of two squeezes.”

He moves his hand on the side of my neck around until his palm rests against my throat lightly. “I wish I could hear every moan, every gasp, every word that leaves your mouth, but at least this way I can feel it. I won’t stop if you don’t hold back.”

“Deal.”

His fingers dip under the silky material. His gaze flits between my eyes and my lips as he strokes gently over my pussy. Two fingers tease my entrance as his thumb circles my clit.

When I moan again, his grip on my throat tightens just a little. Not like he’s trying to cut off my air supply but like he’s trying to capture every sound.

Archer’s fingers work me over in a slow, dizzying rhythm. Every time I moan, he feels the sound vibrate against my throat. And when I come, he looks at me with such awe that I can’t help but say his name over and over again.

“Archer,” I rasp out one more time while his hand cups my neck.

“I love the way you say my name.”

He slides his hand out from my panties and as I catch my breath, he moves me off him gently and I fall onto my back.

A big smile stretches across my face. The music is still going, and I can't hear his breathing, but I can feel his chest rising and falling. Archer drapes an arm around my middle. He's still in his jeans, but he pulls me into his side.

"Can you sleep with music or would you rather listen to Brogan and London?"

I turn my face back to him. "Sleep? What about..." I trail off and arch my butt into his erection.

He groans and tightens his grip against me before placing a kiss on my forehead. "Go to sleep before we do something neither of us can take back."

"You mean like fucking your best friend's sister?"

"I mean like fucking my best friend's sister so hard neither of us can leave this bed tomorrow."

My brows rise and he chuckles. Archer gets out of bed and shucks off his jeans. His dick tents his boxer briefs. Even in the dark I can make out the lines of muscle in his upper body.

"*I choose option two,*" I say and sign.

He takes out his hearing aids and then pulls back the covers. I get underneath fully intending to seduce him, but he tucks me against his side and a happy contentment has my eyes falling shut.

ARCHER

When I wake up the next morning, Sabrina is gone. I shut off my music and get out of bed. I run a hand through my hair as memories from last night play on a loop.

I check my phone to see if she texted. I have a niggling worry that I freaked her out or she changed her mind about wanting to get involved with me. And I'm even more worried by my lack of care about the situation. Brogan is my best friend. I never want to do anything that would hurt him or put his relationship with Sabrina in jeopardy.

After I take a quick shower and get dressed, I head into the kitchen. Brogan is there having breakfast, as I expected, but so is Sabrina.

Hey, sleepyhead, Brogan signs. I don't always put my hearing aids in first thing in the morning, so his default is usually to sign until he knows. It's the little things like this that still take me by surprise. A consideration that most people would never think to make.

"Morning." Sabrina follows his example and signs the greeting as well. She smiles shyly as she picks up a mug of coffee.

"Morning." My voice is still thick with sleep.

"You slept so late I was half-convinced you had a woman in there," Brogan says.

Sabrina stops mid-drink, coughing and sputtering.

"Shit." Brogan turns to her. *"Are you okay?"*

She holds up a hand to wave him off as she moves to the sink where she

sets her mug and continues to cough until she gets a hold of herself.

When Sabrina sneaks a glance at me, all my worries of her not wanting to be involved with me disappear. *Thank fuck.* I fell asleep holding on to her, and the only way it could have been better is if she would have still been there when I woke up.

“I’m going to grab a shower,” she says, diverting her gaze to the floor.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Brogan asks, genuine concern lacing his tone.

“Yep. Fine. See you guys tonight.” She hurries off. Her frenzied state has a smile pulling at my lips.

“Does she seem weird this morning to you?” Brogan asks a few moments later.

I shrug one shoulder but stand. “What time are you heading over to the stadium?”

“Fifteen minutes or so. You want to ride together?” He looks me over with an expression that tells me he doesn’t think I’m going to be ready by then.

“Yeah.” I tap once on the counter and then head down the hall to get ready. Except instead of going to my room, I slip inside Sabrina’s.

“What are you doing?” she squeaks out her surprise and holds a shirt up over her chest. Despite what it looks like, I did not bust in here to see her naked. Not that I would mind it either.

“Sorry. I wanted to make sure you were good.” I move to her. “And maybe kiss you again.”

“I almost gave us away out there,” she says.

I bring my hand up to the side of her neck. Her skin is soft, and the pulse point jumps as I drop my mouth over hers.

“Should have stayed in bed,” I murmur against her lips. I pull back and ask, “Why’d you leave?”

“I didn’t think you’d like it very much if Brogan realized where I was.”

“If we keep doing this, he’s going to figure it out.”

“And you’re okay with that?” she asks, voice climbing higher.

“I’ve never lied to him. I’m not going to start now.”

Her shoulders lift and fall with a breath. “So, we’re doing this?”

I swipe my mouth over hers one more time. “Don’t look so nervous. If he’s going to kill one of us, it’s going to be me.”

She reaches out and grabs my hand. I wish I could stay, but now I have

two reasons to get going. I don't want to be late to practice and I need to tell Brogan I want to date his sister.



"You ready?" Brogan asks as I finally emerge from my room ready for practice.

Sabrina already left for the studio, and I don't see London, so she must be out as well.

"Yeah, but I need to talk to you."

He nods absently. "All right. Can we do it on the way? I have a meeting in twenty minutes."

"Sure. Yeah."

I follow him out to his truck. Mine is still at the stadium, where I left it yesterday before the game.

When we're both in and buckled, he starts the engine. My pulse kicks up a notch. I don't really think he's going to kill me, but he might not be thrilled and that would be almost as bad.

After he's pulled away from the curb, he turns the radio down and shifts in his seat, glancing at me. "You good?"

"Yeah. Great."

His brows lift a fraction. "What'd you want to talk about?"

Okay. We're jumping right in. I swipe my palms down the front of my athletic pants.

"Sabrina."

"What about her?" His tone is defensive and his hands clench around the wheel.

"I like her."

Despite my words, his body language doesn't relax.

"Okay," he says like he's waiting for the catch.

"Wow. You're really going to make me spell this out," I say more to myself than him. "I like her in the way you like London."

He still says nothing, and his brows are now tugging together in the center, forming a crease.

"I want to date your sister," I say. There, it's all out there. Well, most of it. I doubt he wants to hear about how I had her in my bed last night.

“And she feels the same?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

I mean, at least, I think so. Hopefully she wouldn’t send me into this situation knowing the likely outcome would be me getting my ass kicked for nothing.

“You and my sister. You and Sabrina. My best friend and my secret sister...” He trails off, staring over the dashboard to the road. Maybe I should have driven.

“Yeah,” I say. Is it hot in here? I crack the window to let in a little air.

“How did this happen?” he asks, then, “*What* exactly has happened?”

I shift uncomfortably in the passenger seat, tugging at the seat belt that now feels like it’s choking me. “Well, I’ve always been attracted to her...”

He shoots me a glare. To his credit, I don’t think he intends to glare, but he’s obviously struggling to put this together. I think I broke his brain.

“I don’t know. I didn’t want to like her. I was afraid she was going to dip out on you again or that she was going to use your money or fame.”

“Sabrina isn’t like that. Hell, I’ve offered to give her money so many times and she’s never taken it.”

“I know. I realize that now. She’s cool and funny, smart, beautiful.”

The crease is back and it’s Brogan’s turn to shift uncomfortably.

“If you don’t want me to date her, I won’t.” I swallow down the lump that tries to form in my throat. That option would suck, but it’s true.

“I didn’t say that.”

“You haven’t really said anything,” I point out.

The truck comes to a stop. I look around. We’re on a side street with very little traffic. Quiet, deserted, good place to dump the body of your former best friend maybe.

Brogan faces me. I can’t read his expression at all and that worries me. I always know what Brogan is thinking. We’ve been friends for so long sometimes I think I know how he’ll react better than he does.

“Let me get this straight. You like Sabrina. You want to date her, but you want my approval?”

I bob my head. “Yeah, pretty much.”

A hint of a grin appears, pulling up one side of his mouth. “And if I say no, you’re going to stay away from her?”

A bitter taste forms in my mouth. “Yes.”

“Well, fuck...” His expression slowly morphs into a wide grin. “I’m

drunk on the power.”

“Fuck off.”

“No, okay. For real, you think this could be something or this is you asking for permission to sleep with her? Or, fuck, did you already sleep with her? Nope. Don’t answer that.” He holds up a hand to stop me.

“I think it could be something. I’m not just looking to fuck around with her. Trust me, this conversation alone wouldn’t be worth the headache if that’s all I was interested in.”

“Fair enough.”

He reaches over and places a hand on my shoulder, squeezing hard. “This is great. My best friend, no, my *brother* and my sister.”

I wince. I have always considered Brogan more of a brother than a friend but dating my brother’s sister sounds *super* weird.

He chuckles. “You’re the one that’s always insisted we’re brothers.”

“Yeah, yeah, we might be brothers, but she is *not* my sister.”

“I’m happy. This is exciting.”

“Are you? Because you’re squeezing kinda hard.”

“I know.” He grins. “I think I really am drunk on the power. You were totally sweating how I’d react. Man, I wish I’d known this was coming. I could have really fucked with you, maybe threatened you a little.” He makes his voice deep. “If you hurt her, I will rip you into pieces and feed you to the coyotes.”

I shrug out of his hold. “All right. All right. You can threaten me later. We’re going to be late for practice.”

SABRINA

I'm cleaning out brushes in the back when I hear Brogan call out from the front. "Sabrina?"

"In the back," I call, then turn off the water and dry my hands.

He's standing in the middle of the room, taking it all in, when I step out.

"Hey," I say. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to finally see this place for myself." He grins.

"Here it is," I say, holding my hands out at my sides. "What do you think?"

"It's cool."

I snort a laugh. "Not the first adjective that comes to most people's mind when they see it."

"Eh, most people have no imagination. I can see past the work that needs to be done."

"Really? Because I'm still even a little overwhelmed by it. I've been painting for days and only managed to finish one wall."

His grin remains. "It'll all come together."

"Thanks. So, what brings you by today?" I am fishing. Clearly, I know why he's here. Archer must have told him we're...whatever we're doing. But I can't tell whether Brogan is upset about it or not.

"I wanted to see you and I knew it'd make Archer sweat more if I told him I was coming to have a little chat with you."

A surprised laugh slips from my lips. I motion toward the chairs over

behind what will one day be the front desk. "I have bottled water in the back or there's a coffee shop across the street if you want something."

"No, I'm good," he says, sitting in one of the chairs and leaning back. Brogan has a way of always making himself at home, but it makes me happy to see him relaxing in the studio. Most people seem on edge when they're here.

"This place is really cool. And the location is awesome. When do you think you'll open?"

I blow out a breath. "At this rate, next year."

"Really?"

"I need to finish painting, lay the new floors, build a front desk, then have electrical and plumbing looked at, and get internet and speakers hung, and like a million other little things."

"You're doing all this yourself?"

I know if I tell him I can't afford it, he'll offer to pay, so I say, "I want to be a part of every detail in this place. I've dreamed about it for so long."

"If there's anything I can do, name it."

"I got it, but thank you."

"Are you sure? I'm off tomorrow." He moves his head back and forth. "After that it's a busy few months, but I'll do anything I can. You're not in this alone."

His words tug at my emotions. Time and again I forget how nice it is to have a brother that has so easily accepted me into his life.

"Thank you. I might take you up on that when it's time to lay the flooring. I probably shouldn't be allowed to work a saw."

His mouth hitches up on one side. "I love power tools."

"Speaking of not doing it alone, Archer has helped."

"Really?"

"Yeah." I nod. "He helped clean up in here. It was way worse when I started."

"That was nice of him."

"It was." He's not taking the bait and now I'm starting to sweat.

"He's a good guy. The best, actually."

"Is there a but coming?" I ask.

"No." His chest shakes with a laugh. "I'm happy for you both, but uh, I feel like I should warn you, I guess."

"Warn me about what?"

He runs a hand along his jaw as he clearly struggles with how to phrase whatever he wants to say.

“Is he like a serial dater or something? Because I don’t even know if I’m looking for anything serious and we haven’t really talked about where this could go. It might just be a fling or it might be more. Either way, I’m good. You don’t need to worry about me.”

“No, that’s not it,” he says slowly. “But I’m not pumped to know my sister might be looking to be my best friend’s fuck buddy.”

I stifle a laugh, and he clears his throat.

“Archer hasn’t had the best luck dating.”

“Who has?” I wave a hand in front of him. “Except you and London, obviously.”

“More than your typical bad date stuff.”

I have a sudden surge of anger that someone might have hurt Archer. It seems so unbelievable but at the same time I am ready to throw down at the thought.

“What do you mean?” I ask, trying to keep my emotions in check.

“He’s always made sure that his hearing loss didn’t impact others. He learned to lip read and got the hearing aids, figured out how to be in social situations or even the football field without people needing to accommodate him. And he’s done the same thing with dating.”

“He accommodates them?” I ask, trying to understand exactly what Brogan is telling me.

“Yeah, but to a point that puts what’s best for him in jeopardy. Look, you know sign language, and every encounter I’ve seen between the two of you, you seem like you’ve kept his needs in mind when communicating. That’s huge. Way more than most people do for him.”

“That sucks, but of course. I will do my best to always be considerate.”

“I know and I didn’t want to say anything, but I thought I should tell you because he won’t. He hates the idea of needing special treatment or being a burden.”

“I don’t think of him like that.”

“I know, but there might come a point where he feels like he’s holding you back in some way or you might do something that makes it harder on him and he won’t tell you.” He chuckles softly. “When we were kids, he’d only turn the subtitles on the TV when he was watching it by himself. For like three years he did this. None of us even knew or thought about how

much easier that'd make it for him, and he was just dealing with it because he didn't want to draw more attention to the fact he was different."

I swallow thickly, nodding. I can picture Archer doing something like that. I haven't known him long, but it fits with what I've learned about him. He's selfless to a fault. Even hating me wasn't really about him not liking me. He did it because he was protecting Brogan.

"Thank you for telling me. I promise I'll keep that in mind."

"I know you will. And truth be told, I think it'll be good for him to date someone that is more considerate. The last girl basically just didn't acknowledge he's deaf."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, she wasn't great to him and that's just what he's told me. I'm sure she did worse things that he'd never tell me about."

I don't know if I'm angrier that he dated other people, which is ridiculous—of course he did, probably lots of them, or that some bitch made him feel less than. Yes, she's a bitch and I don't use that term lightly.

"He's lucky to have you," I say to my brother.

"He saved my life. If it weren't for him and his family, I don't know where I would have ended up. They took me in when I had nothing. I'd do anything for him."

I smile. I think they have the sweetest friendship of any two people I've ever known. It says a lot about them both.

"So, what are you doing tonight?" he asks.

"I have to work for a few hours at the club. I'm covering a shift. Why?"

"I was hoping the four of us could hang out so I could fuck with him some more. I was thinking every time he touched you, I'd growl. Or maybe I could walk around with a kitchen knife. The ideas are infinite."

Poor Archer. "Another time."

His grin softens. "For real though, I can't think of anyone I'd rather date you or him."

"That's sweet...I think."

He stands and clears his throat. "One last thing. I know Archer isn't my brother the same way you're my sister, but he's still family, so... If you hurt him, I will have to kick your ass, or at least give you the silent treatment or something. I won't like it, and I'll still love you and care for you, but it will be necessary."

God, I love him. I love how deeply he cares for his people and how

ridiculous he is about showing it.

“Fair enough.” I stand and he steps over to me, throwing one arm around my shoulders.

“Now, let’s get out of here and head home. Your boyfriend was pissed I wouldn’t let him come with me.”

My stomach flutters at Archer being referred to as my boyfriend and at the idea that he wanted to come. I missed him all day, which feels incredibly too fast for the small amount of time we’ve been hanging out. Twenty-four hours ago he was determined to never kiss me again.

“He is not my boyfriend,” I say, feeling my face heat.

“Not yet.”

ARCHER

“Did you see Sabrina last night?” Brogan asks with a big smirk Tuesday morning when I come out of my room for breakfast.

“No. She probably got in late.”

He’s still grinning.

“I’m not some sort of creeper waiting up to knock on her door late at night for a quick...” I trail off when his brows lift. “I mean a tender, loving fuck.”

Now it’s my turn to grin. Look at that, I figured out how to mess with him the same way he’s been doing to me. While we were hanging out watching TV last night, he kept looking up true crime stories about friends and roommates and letting me know all the clever ways they’d been killed. And this morning he sent me a video on how to plan the perfect murder.

“Okay. You made your point.” He grimaces. “I don’t know if it’s worse because she’s my sister or because I’ve seen your pale, white ass so often I can get a vivid picture.”

“It’s too early for this,” I say with a laugh as I head to the coffee pot and pour a mug for myself.

“Temporary truce?”

“Sure,” I say, sipping the hot liquid. In truth, I did want to stay up and see Sabrina when she got home, but I figured the last thing she wanted after working all night was to have me knocking on her door at two in the morning.

“I was thinking.”

“Always a scary opening to any conversation with you,” I deadpan.

He flips me off. “What do you think about spending the day doing some community service?”

“Is there some team thing I’m not aware of?” It’s our one day off this week and I’m grateful for the break.

“No. Although let’s circle back to that.”

“What’s the thing?” I ask. We do a lot of work in the community with the Mavericks, and we’ve talked about doing more, but I can’t guess what he has in mind on a random Tuesday morning.

“I stopped by Sabrina’s studio yesterday.”

“Right.”

“It needs a lot of fucking work.”

“That’s an understatement,” I say, feeling bad admitting it. She took on a lot and I have no doubt she’ll make it look great but it’s a big job.

Brogan tips his head and grins at me.

“You want to go help her?” I stand tall, already feeling more awake.

“Ding, ding, ding. You in?”

“Definitely.”

“You just want an excuse to see her, right?”

I roll my eyes. “Can’t a guy just want to do a good deed for his best friend’s sister?”

“He can, but it’s more believable when he’s not picturing her naked.”

“Circling back...” I prompt him.

“Nice deflection.”

“Thank you.” We’re both grinning now, and it feels good to be joking around like normal. He’s been cool about the whole thing, but I did worry that wouldn’t be the case.

“There is a ton to do. Painting, flooring, building shit...” He trails off. “All the guys on the team like her and I bet we could get a lot of them to help. We could knock out a huge chunk of her list in a few hours.”

I’m nodding along and I can’t stop smiling. He’s right. Fuck, I wish I would have thought of it.

“I’ll text the team and see who’s free.” He pulls out his phone. “Unless you think that’s something a boyfriend should do.”

I flip him off as I walk backward toward the bathroom to shower and get ready. Maybe I should be concerned about how excited I am to spend the day

doing manual labor, but I'm not. Sabrina will be there.



As Brogan predicted, a lot of the guys on the team show up to help. We're standing in a parking lot two blocks down and we're getting more than a few looks from people trying to figure out what's happening. I wouldn't say people instantly recognize us around the city, but if you put six or seven big dudes in one area, it just sort of draws the eye.

"Go ahead," Brogan says to me with a grin. "We'll wait for Tripp and Merrick."

"It's cool. We can all go together."

He laughs, probably picking up on the excited energy that is making it hard for me to stand still. Grinning, he hands me one of the extra coffees we picked up on the way. "Go say hey to your girl."

"Thanks." I lift the cup and then head up the street to the studio. My pulse picks up speed the closer I get. The door is open, and music plays from somewhere inside.

Sabrina has her back to me, both hands gripping the end of a long paint roller as she works on rolling the white paint onto a wall. She shakes her hips from side to side as she works.

I step inside and take her in. Her hair is pulled up in a ponytail, and she's wearing a baggy T-shirt that nearly hides the small shorts underneath.

While I'm trying to decide how to get her attention without scaring her, she turns to dip the roller into the tray on the floor.

Her mouth opens and pulls into a smile before she says, "Hi."

I tip my head to her. Fuck. Twenty-four hours and I forgot how beautiful she is. I clear my throat. "Hey."

"What are you doing here?"

"It's our day off. I thought you might need some help."

"I can think of a lot better ways to enjoy your day off."

"True, but you're not there."

She laughs and a slight blush pinks her cheeks. Sabrina's gaze drops to the coffee in my hand. "Is that for me?"

"Yeah."

I hand it to her, and she takes it in one hand and with the other fists my T-

shirt and tugs me forward. She presses her lips to mine in a chaste kiss, but lets her mouth linger there after as she says, "Thank you."

I kiss her again. "You're welcome."

She pulls back but continues staring at me. "I missed you last night."

She was only home for about an hour between working here and going to Lilac and I had to share her with Brogan and London. I don't know how I'm going to get some time alone with her, but it's a top priority.

"Same. I tried to stay awake, but I guess I passed out."

"It was late. The rock gods were going strong."

"You could have woken me up."

"I wasn't sure if we were there." She looks adorably bashful. An uncertain Sabrina is something new.

"You weren't sure if we were *where*?"

"A place where I can sneak into your room at night. We haven't even been on a date."

"Baby, you can sneak into my room any time you like." But she's right. She deserves a real date. I steal another kiss, dropping my hands to either side of her neck.

The vibration of footsteps and the low noise that sounds like someone is clearing their throat has me pulling back sooner than I'd like.

I glance over my shoulder to see Brogan, Tripp, Merrick, Cody, Slade, and even a couple of new rookies standing in the doorway of the studio.

"What is happening?" Sabrina moves to stand beside me, eyes wide with confusion as she looks from them to me.

Brogan lifts both brows. "Arch didn't tell you?"

"I was busy." I run a hand along my jaw and hide the grin pulling at my lips.

"Yeah, I saw." Brogan's tone is dry as he steps forward and hugs his sister. He shoots me a playful glare and then says, "We're here to help."

"You are *all* here to help?" The surprise on her face has us all smiling at her.

"We heard you might need a few good men to help around here." Slade steps forward and lifts one beefy arm, kissing his bicep.

Sabrina's expression softens. "I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything." Brogan waves everyone forward. "Just tell us what needs to be done."

While Sabrina rattles off the things on her list, the guys start moving

toward different spots. Merrick and the rookies decide to paint, and Tripp and Cody take off to go pick up the flooring she ordered.

“What do you need me to do?” Slade asks.

“Are you any good with plumbing?” she asks hopefully. “The sink in the bathroom is leaking. I tried to tighten the bolt thing, but I’m not strong enough.”

“On it.” He picks up a toolbox I hadn’t realized he brought in with him and struts to the back, leaving me and Brogan alone with her.

“You guys...” Sabrina stares between us. “This is too much. I can’t believe you got them to come help.”

“It was all Brogan,” I say. “He has a way of convincing people to do things.”

He shakes his head. “I didn’t have to convince anyone. They were all happy to help.”

“Still. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he says, looking every bit the proud big brother.

She takes in the busy studio around us and blows out a breath. “I don’t know what we’re going to do now.”

“Arch and I are going to get some music going in here. Do you know where you want the speakers and studio equipment.”

“I don’t have any of that yet.”

“You do now.” Brogan tips his head to me. “Archer picked it out. It’s out in the truck.”

It hadn’t felt like a big deal at the time, but the way she looks at me has me shifting my weight from one foot to the other and avoiding her direct gaze.

“Thank you.” She steps to me and wraps her arms around my neck, pressing her body against mine.

I catch Brogan’s gaze behind her. He salutes me and turns on his heel to head back outside to start bringing in the stereo equipment.

“You’re welcome.” I hug her back, keeping her close and brushing my lips over hers again. I hear someone catcall behind us, probably Tripp. Sabrina’s lips curve into a smile and she giggles into my mouth before she pulls back.

“Come on,” I say. “You can help me.”

That way I can kiss her a whole lot more.

SABRINA

The studio looks amazing.

I can't stop staring around the space and grinning. All the walls are painted, the barre is hung on the front wall, the new floor has been laid, and speakers hung.

The rookies already took off, but the rest of the guys are sitting around on empty boxes and overturned buckets and there are pizza boxes strewn around the floor.

"I better get going." Cody is the first to stand.

"Yeah, me too." Tripp gets to his feet as well and hikes a thumb toward Merrick. "This guy has a date tonight and he needs a shower."

Tripp leans toward his buddy and sniffs, then makes a face that has us all smiling. Merrick is a quieter guy and at the attention, his face pinks.

I hold a hand over my mouth as I finish chewing and then say, "Thank you so much for today. I can't believe this place. I don't know how I'll ever repay you guys. Free dance lessons for all your future children."

"I'm going to hold you to that," Tripp says.

"Good luck tonight, buddy!" Brogan calls out to Merrick.

"Oh, hey," my brother adds like it just occurred to him. "Archer has some cologne you could borrow, maybe. It seems to have worked for him."

Merrick finally cracks a smile.

"No way." Archer shakes his head. "I can't have the whole team smelling like me. Chicks like the way I smell. It draws them in."

I bust out laughing and Archer smirks in my direction.

“Worked on you,” he says and winks.

“Worried I’m gonna steal your girl?” Merrick asks him. The big, quiet guy glances over at me quickly.

“You are handsome,” I tell him.

I swear his face goes even redder.

But not as handsome as me, right? Archer signs.

“What’s he saying?” Merrick asks. “Is he threatening to kick my ass.”

“Yes,” Archer says at the same time I say, “No.”

Archer and I are locked in a stare off. No one is as handsome as him. Not that I’m going to admit it now in front of all these guys. Is that even something you’re supposed to admit to a guy?

I don’t know. I’ve never been so into someone that the rest of the world seems to disappear, but in a room of attractive and nice professional athletes, the only one I’m interested in staring at is Archer.

“All right. Let’s get out of here before Archer throws a hammer at your head.” Tripp puts an arm around his buddy’s shoulders and leads him out, glancing back at me as they go. “Later, Sabrina.”

“Bye. Thank you again,” I yell as they head out with Cody right behind them.

“I should get out of here too,” Slade says. “I need to make a call to my therapist.”

He turns a playful scowl my direction.

“I swear I thought I warned everyone about the mice —”

“Ahhh.” He holds up a hand, cutting me off. “Don’t say the word.”

His entire body shudders.

“Thank you. Sorry for traumatizing you.”

“I’ve never heard anyone squeal that loudly,” Brogan says.

I stand and hug the traumatized giant. He looks like he needs it. Slade wraps his arms around my back in a bear hug and lifts me off the ground. I squeal, a lot like he had as he ran out of the bathroom earlier.

He finally sets me down and I can take a full breath again.

“The place looks great. Good luck with everything. Let me know when you’re open.”

“I will. Thanks.”

When the big guy leaves, it’s just me, Archer, and Brogan.

I collapse back onto a box next to Archer. My arms and legs are tired. I

didn't even do that much, but I am exhausted.

"Don't say it," Brogan says when I open my mouth to thank them again.

"Seriously, look at this place!" A renewed energy surges through me. I wave my hands around. It's empty, but it's clean and beautiful and ready for all the plans I've made over the years. "This would have taken me months. Maybe longer."

Archer bumps his leg against mine. "You're welcome."

"We're excited for you. When do you think you'll be able to open?"

That brings on a whole new set of nerves. "I'm not sure. A month maybe? London offered to design some flyers and other graphics for my website so I can get the word out. Then I just wait and hope people show up."

As if Archer can feel my anxiousness, he drapes an arm around my shoulders and pulls me into his chest. "They will."

"You should have a grand opening. Food, music," Brogan suggests.

"Dancing," I add.

"Exactly." Brogan points at me.

The more I think about it, the more I like it. "That's actually a good idea."

"Of course it is." My brother makes a face like he's offended I'd suggest he ever has anything but good ideas.

"More stuff to figure out," I say, but my excitement grows. Archer drops a kiss to my forehead. It's nice sitting here with these two, having their support. I never imagined this when I set out to find my brother, but it's so much better than anything I could have dreamed up anyway.

"Okay," Brogan says. "I'm going to head home and leave you two to... whatever."

Archer's chest shakes with laughter, and he lets his arm fall away from my shoulders so we can stand to say goodbye to Brogan. I hug him tightly, thanking him a dozen more times until he laughs.

Archer hugs him next in one of those side hugs where they slap each other's backs.

"See you at home." Brogan lifts a hand over his head to wave as he walks out of the studio.

I turn and place my arms on Archer's shoulders. "I bet you're anxious to get home too."

"Nope. I'm exactly where I want to be."

"Exactly?" I ask, leaning closer to brush my lips over his.

"You could have on less clothes, but otherwise, yeah."

Laughing, I pull back. "I want to take some pictures of all the work we got done for my mom and then we can go."

While I walk around with my phone, snapping photos from every angle, Archer stacks up the pizza boxes and cleans up all the trash leftover from today. After the speakers went up earlier, Archer hooked up his phone to play music. Rock, of course.

I send my mom a text with all the photos attached and then put my phone in my purse. I'm standing with my back against the barre, still taking it all in, and completely in awe.

"Okay. I'm ready," I say but don't move.

Archer walks over to me.

"What made you want to open a dance studio anyway?" he asks, circling my waist and pulling me away from the barre so he can slide his hands down to my ass.

"My mom was a dancer. She even did some shows on Broadway before they adopted me. Then she got a part-time job at a little studio so she could be home with me. She took me with her while she taught pretty often. I loved being there with her. When I was a kid, I couldn't think of anything better than owning a studio where I could dance any time I wanted." I laugh lightly. "I still can't."

"That's cool."

"The wild thing is I probably wouldn't have done it if my mom hadn't gotten sick."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. It's a lot of work and scary. The space is almost done now, but I could still fail. The kids could hate me, or I could not make enough money to pay the rent. There are so many unknowns still and I've never been big on taking chances like that."

"You won't fail. You're braver than you give yourself credit."

"Maybe, but if things hadn't happened like they did, I probably would have kept working at Lilac Lounge and applied at other studios to teach instead of opening my own right away. That would have been safer."

He moves his hands up to frame my face. I love his hazel eyes, the way they spark with different colors depending on his mood. Right now, they're almost green. "You are an incredible woman, Sabrina. This studio is going to be a success because of you. It doesn't matter how you got here. You still did it. You should be proud of that. I know your parents will be. And your

brother. You won't even need an advertising budget with Brogan. He'll be telling anyone and everyone that will listen."

"And you?"

His hands drop to my shoulders. "I might sign up just so I can come watch you dance."

"You want to watch me dance?" I ask because I'm not sure any guy I've dated has ever said that. I mean, sure, sometimes they've seen me dance sort of incidentally out at clubs or parties together, but that isn't really the same thing.

"Definitely."

"Maybe we could dance together." I let my finger glide over his chest as I move, circling around behind him.

He stays still, but I feel his body tense as I slip my hands under his T-shirt. His skin is warm and his muscles contract as I let my palms roam.

Archer turns slowly to face me. I take a step back and slowly start to move to the beat of the music playing over the speakers. He tracks every movement I make. It's exhilarating. My hair is messy, and my clothes are splattered with paint, but he looks at me like I'm the sexiest thing he's ever seen.

My fingers curl around the hem of my long T-shirt and I pull it up, inch by inch, then let it fall.

He finally reaches for me, fisting my shirt and tugging me to him. His mouth crashes down over mine and he kisses me hungrily. It's short but leaves me breathless and my heart racing.

I step back and dance a few steps of a routine I choreographed ages ago. I've always loved to dance, but my skin tingles with anticipation as he watches me. For weeks I've imagined what it would be like to do this in my very own finished studio, but this is better than anything I fantasied about.

I don't dance for very long before the need to touch him and feel his hands on me is too strong to resist. I move back to him. His kiss this time is slower, unhurried, but just as rough. I press into his body, loving the way I can feel just how turned on he is by me.

My hands slide back under his shirt. I'm obsessed with his chest and stomach. If I'd been asked what body type I was into before, I would have shrugged the question off, but that's because I didn't know this existed. If I weren't running my fingers over the ridges of muscles in his stomach, I'd think they were airbrushed on. They're too perfect. Hard-earned, sculpted,

and so sexy.

Archer's hands move to my neck, reminding me how much he likes it when he can feel the vibration of my noises. I want to know what else he likes.

My fingers move to the front of his jeans. He lets out a gruff noise at the contact that makes my lips curve into a smile. I unbutton him and pull the zipper down so I can slide my hand around him.

He nips my bottom lip in response, urging me on. I work his jeans and boxer briefs down, so I can get to more of him. When his cock springs free, my pulse rockets. He's thick and hard. He makes the sexiest noises as I explore him, stroking his hot, velvety length.

The way he kisses and feels makes my core throb. With one hand, I push him back against the barre and drop to my knees in front of him.

"Oh fuck," he says as I look up at him and bring my lips to the crown of his cock. I lick and tease the tip before slowly taking him farther into my mouth. His hands stay on the sides of my neck. His thumb strokes along my pulse point.

"That feels so good. Oh fuck. I love it when you dance for me."

I laugh lightly around him, then hollow out my cheeks, sucking as I glide up. I pop off him and he glides his thumb over my lips.

"You take me so good."

If his words were meant to make me want him more, then he is successful. I take him back into my mouth and all the way back to my throat. He lets out a low growl of approval and one of his hands moves to the back of my head. He wraps my ponytail around his hand and takes over, moving me exactly how he wants me.

I glance up and we lock eyes. His are filled with the same desire I feel thrumming through me. When I think he's about to come, he lifts me onto my feet and crashes his mouth down over mine.

My breasts are sensitive as they press into his hard chest and when his hands slide into my shorts, I'm soaked and aching.

He pushes the fabric down. He briefly stops kissing me to squat down and pull my shorts and panties to my ankles. I step out and he presses his lips to one calf. He does the same for himself, stepping out of his jeans and boxer briefs.

The anticipation, standing there with the cool air hitting my pussy, makes my stomach flutter with nerves.

Archer grabs his wallet out of his jeans and gets a condom. He looks at me, as if making sure I want this.

I nod and my lips quirk up as I say, "Dance with me?"

A wide smile lights up his face as he brings the foil packet up to his mouth and tears it open. He takes out the condom and covers himself.

"Who knew I was such a fan of dancing?" He trails kisses up the column of my neck. "Don't forget. Squeeze twice if you ever want me to stop."

I'm lost to the sensation of his mouth and the graze of his teeth.

"Sabrina?"

"Got it," I say.

He turns me around facing the window. We taped them off earlier with a clear plastic sheet that blurs the night outside to paint, but it's still a thrill as I think about how anyone could see us like this.

His mouth continues to drop kisses along my shoulder and spine. His hands move under my shirt, coming up to cup my breasts through my bra. But when I let out a moan, he moves one hand to my throat. I do it again and again, letting him feel my desire for him.

When he finally lines up his cock at my entrance, I'm dripping for him. He lifts my right leg, and I use the barre to prop it up. This is one way I never imagined using the barre.

He pushes his thick length into me slowly. The anticipation mixed with how good he feels has my pussy clenching around him and my orgasm building already.

I want this feeling to last forever, but I'm too eager for more. I push back into him until he's completely buried inside me.

"Goddamn, baby. You're so tight it's hard to move."

I turn my head so I can look at him. He takes the opportunity to swipe his mouth over mine.

"Want me back on my knees instead?" I ask with a smirk.

He growls. "Later."

Then he picks up the rhythm, driving into me hard and steady. The hand under my shirt tweaks my nipples and the one on my throat presses just hard enough to capture all the vibrations of my moans. When I'm close, and barely able to hold myself, he takes over clutching me to him as he brings us both over the edge.

My orgasm seems to go on forever and he doesn't stop until he's wrung it all out of me. He kisses my shoulder as I bring my leg back down to the floor.

Even with both feet on the ground, I feel like I'm made of jelly.

"Be right back." He steps away from me and comes back a minute later with a wet paper towel.

"You braved the mice for me?" I ask as he cleans me up. There's something incredibly intimate and sweet about it. But also, I just want him all over again.

"Anything for you."

"Anything, huh?" I place my hands on his chest as I study his face. "Sometimes I feel like I've known you a lot longer than I have."

"Speaking of..." He trails off and clears his throat. I get hit with nerves. What an intro statement to leave me hanging on. Has he been secretly stalking me for years? Did I meet him once and forget about it? No, definitely not that. I'd remember him. He aims a boyish smile at me. "Will you go on a date with me?"

ARCHER

Holland Brothers

ME

Good luck tonight, little brother.

FLYNN

Thanks.

HENDRICK

Can't wait to see you, Flynn the Flame Holland! 🔥

KNOX

I'm not sold on that nickname.

BROGAN

Workshop nicknames later? Also, our seats are crap. Don't they know what a big deal you are?

FLYNN

You're lucky I could get any seats during the playoffs.

BROGAN

I'm not sure I'll even be able to see the field from these seats.

FLYNN

You don't have to come. 🙅

KNOX

We'll all be there. Keep bringing the heat.

The four of us travel to Chicago to watch Flynn. We file into the row to our seats before the game starts.

“There’s Flynn,” Knox says, pointing down by the dugout. He’s starting tonight. His first major league start.

I try to think back to my first game with the Mavericks. I was injured at the start of the season, so I stood on the sidelines for a while before I ever got to step onto the field during regulation.

But this is huge for Flynn. He’s the youngest starting pitcher in Twins history, and to be brought up during such a crucial time is any young player’s dream.

The weight of it has us all nervous as we sit down. Brogan is eating his feelings with two hot dogs, nachos, a pretzel, and a giant beer. Knox has a scowl on his face as he stares down at the field like he can control everything if he just stares hard enough. Hendrick is all smiles. I think it’s the distance from his own professional football career that lets him look back with rose-colored glasses. I don’t think he’s forgotten the nerves and pressure, but he’s far enough removed now that he remembers all the good things more.

We stand for the national anthem. The Twins are in Chicago tonight, so they don’t get the same applause as the White Sox, but at the bottom of the first inning, the four of us yell loud enough to make up for it when Flynn takes the mound.

“Oh fuck, I’m going to throw up,” Brogan says, holding his stomach.

“Yeah, no kidding.” Knox snorts, looking more like his usual self before the worried mask returns. He claps his hands together twice and says so quietly I barely hear it, “Let’s go, little brother.”

I sit forward in my seat and hold my breath as he winds up and throws the first pitch. The umpire calls the strike, and we are on our feet like he just hit a grand slam home run. We get more than a few looks of amusement, a couple of glares, but we ignore everything except Flynn down on the mound.

He throws two more strikes and the first batter heads back to the bench. We are on our feet again.

“Flynn the Flaaaaaame!” Brogan yells, then he turns to Knox. “You might be right. Flynn the Rocket?” He shakes his head without waiting for anyone else to chime in. “It’ll come to me.”

The people around us start to send us side-glances as Brogan starts trying out different names.

“That’s our little brother,” I tell them, then join in with Brogan, cupping

my hands around my mouth and yelling, “Flynn Holland the Fastest Pitcher Allllllive.”

“No,” Knox says and signs immediately.

After that, the crowd—at least the small group around us—is a little less hostile. A few people even join in. Flynn strikes out his first two batters, and the third hits a grounder that the second baseman easily scoops up and tosses him out at first.

The jumbotron follows Flynn as he jogs off the field to the dugout. He’s got this serious expression on his face that reminds me of Knox, but one of his teammates hits the bill of his cap and a hint of a grin appears, turning him back into my playful younger brother.

Hendrick and I breathe a sigh of relief, Knox’s face softens slightly, and Brogan stops eating.

The latter looks to me as we relax into our seats. “Fifty bucks says he ends the night giving up less than four runs.”

That would be a phenomenal game for any player, let alone a rookie. “You’re on.”

“No.” Hendrick frowns at us. So much for his relief. “You cannot bet on Flynn.”

“Oh, like he wouldn’t do it to all of us.” Knox cracks a small smile. “Seventy-five he only gives up one.”

For the next few innings, we are glued to the field every time Flynn takes the mound. He’s dialed in. Untouchable. Throwing at speeds that has even the home crowd rooting.

“Well, there goes my legacy as the most popular Holland.” Brogan throws a hand up like he’s annoyed, but he’s grinning.

“That was always debatable,” I say.

“Just because my sister likes you possibly more than me, doesn’t mean the rest of the world agrees.”

I hadn’t mentioned Sabrina to Knox or Hendrick yet, but they don’t miss a beat.

“You and the secret sister?” Knox asks first. Hendrick stares my way with interest too.

Flynn strikes out another batter and the inning ends with groans from the crowd.

“Atta boy, Flynn,” I yell, then take a sip of my beer. When I’m done, my brothers are still waiting for an answer.

“We’re hanging out,” I say.

“She’s your roommate. Of course you’re hanging out,” Knox says dryly, but then a hint of a smile tugs up one corner of his mouth.

I roll my eyes. “We’re hanging out at places that aren’t the apartment.”

“They’re fucking,” Brogan chirps.

I give him a side-eye glare.

“What?” He shrugs both shoulders. “You are.”

“Dude. She’s your sister,” Hendrick says to him. “Isn’t that weird to say?”

“Weirder to say out loud than I thought it would be.” He grimaces.

“That’s definitely payback for all the times you and London have made me glad I can’t hear shit,” I say to him.

Knox laughs. He’s relaxing a little more with each inning.

“Sabrina’s cool. We’ve gone out a few times and I like her.” I lean closer to Brogan. “And she definitely likes me better than you.”

“Fuck off.” Brogan pushes my shoulder.

“Good for you.” Knox tips his head to me. “Glad that the dry spell is over.”

“I was not in a dry spell.”

He and Brogan laugh. Fuckers.

“I hate to be that guy, but what if it doesn’t work out?” Hendrick cocks one brow. “Won’t it be awkward? She’s his sister and you two have been inseparable since middle school.”

“Then it doesn’t work out,” I say, though even just thinking about it makes me frown.

“You can’t be naïve to think it’d be that simple,” Hendrick adds.

Brogan considers it for a second. “Sabrina’s pretty chill. I don’t think she’ll hold it against me just because he fucked it up.”

Hendrick doesn’t look convinced, but he goes back to watching the game.

“I am not going to fuck it up,” I say to Brogan.

He laughs. “You really like her, huh?”

“Yeah. I really do. I told you that.” Sabrina and I went out twice this week. I took her out to dinner Tuesday night and we closed the place down. Last night she had to work at Lilac, so I stopped by the studio after practice, and we went to Home Depot to pick up some things she needed. I wouldn’t have called it a date, but Sabrina said it counted since we kissed in the middle of the trim aisle and in the truck. And in the studio.

“I know, but guys say crazy shit before they sleep with a girl. Especially when they’ve been going through a dry spell.”

I rub at my forehead with two fingers. “For the last time, I was not in a dry spell.”

“Good because I wanted to run something by you.”

“*What’s that?*” I ask, signing too because the music is pumping loudly. I think the White Sox’s media team is making a last-ditch effort to get the crowd riled up in hopes it boosts the players.

“*You should bring her to the silent auction next week.*”

“The fundraiser at Coach’s house?” I ask, making a face. I’m not an asshole. I don’t dislike the concept of fundraisers and community service, but the formal events are so boring. It’s a lot of polite conversation and handshaking and drinking beer out of a tall glass, so it seems more respectable.

The invite to Coach’s house was optional but highly recommended via Anthony, the Mavericks head of PR.

“*It’ll be fun. London and I are going. She’s picked out a dress and shoes and...Just ask her. She’ll be into it, and I wanted to bring her, but I only got a plus one.*”

I chuckle. “There it is.”

“What? Like you were going to ask anyone else.”

“*I wasn’t going at all, so...*”

One of Flynn’s teammates hits a grand slam and the crowd quiets as the Twins players file out to home plate to celebrate.

“Fuck. He might actually do it.” Hendrick leans forward.

Flynn glances up at the stands as he walks back to the dugout. I know he can’t see us, but I swear he looks right at us.

Hendrick is right. He could actually pull off a win for the Twins and give up less than two runs all on his first start. My chest swells with pride.

Flynn and I have always been close. Not in the same way as him and Knox. Knox was like a dad to him, always looking out for him and making sure he, and all the rest of us, had what we needed. I’m grateful for that because it let me have a relationship with him that’s just fun, teasing, all the things you’d expect from a big brother. He used to tag along behind me and Brogan, tossing the football around with us or playing video games. As he got older, he became more introverted and moody. Typical teenager things, I guess, but I’ve missed the hell out of him since he moved away.

When we were growing up, all under one small roof, I probably wished for more space and privacy, but those days were good despite everything with our mom passing and Dad flaking out on us. And as I glance around at myself, Brogan, Knox, and Hendrick sitting together watching Flynn play, it's just like when we were all together watching Flynn play high school ball.

I've missed this. While I'm lost in my thoughts and feeling grateful, I spot a familiar face a section over, one row down. We make eye contact, and I just stare for a moment, thinking there's no way I could be seeing right.

The man looks away and I nudge Brogan.

"Our dad is here." I tip my head in that direction.

He finds him and then passes it along.

"I knew he was coming," Knox says when Hendrick points him out. "He's been at every single one of Flynn's games the past two years."

"He went to his college games?"

"Yeah." Knox nods. "He was living there for a while and I guess when Flynn left, so did he."

"Woah." Brogan's eyes go wide as he waits for my reaction. Judging by the look on Hendrick's face, he already knew.

Knox must pick up on the tension because he looks right at me. "I wasn't sure if Flynn had told you."

"No. He never mentioned it."

"He probably thought you'd give him some speech on not trusting Dad."

"And you didn't give him that speech?"

"I made peace with the fact Flynn wants a relationship with him."

I bite back on my molars. He might have, but I haven't. It's not that I think our dad is all evil or something. He's just a deadbeat. Has been my whole life. All our lives. And yeah, I guess I'm a little pissy that Dad seems to have gotten his act together for Flynn when he couldn't do that for the rest of us.



After the game, we file down to the lower level to wait for Flynn. He told us to meet him here, but it's been more than twenty minutes since he said he was on his way.

"Maybe he had to get on the bus," Hendrick says, checking his watch

again.

“He’ll be here,” Knox assures us.

A few seconds later, a group of women squeal in the distance and Flynn appears, parting them down the middle and giving them a quick nod of his head and a sly grin. He saunters toward us, cocky and all swagger.

“Fuck me sideways.” Brogan chuckles.

Flynn looks nothing like the shy kid I saw earlier this summer.

“Hey.” He drops his duffel to the ground.

We all just stare at him.

“Are you going to hug me or what?” Flynn asks. He holds his arms out to his sides and Knox steps forward.

Brogan is next.

“Baby Holland.” He ruffles his hair. “That’s better.”

“Flynn the Flame.” Hendrick hugs him tight and tries to pick him up off the ground, but Flynn’s now the tallest of us so it doesn’t really work like it did when he was younger.

When it’s my turn, I can barely believe my eyes. He looks like my baby brother, but he’s all grown up. He’s like some weird mash-up of Brogan’s playfulness with Knox’s arrogance and Hendrick’s height. He’s grown up. I still feel a protectiveness over him but maybe he doesn’t need it anymore.

“That was unbelievable,” I say as I embrace him. “You cost me seventy-five dollars.”

“Betting against me?” He squeezes the back of my neck with one hand and wraps the other one around me.

“Never.”

“Ahh. I’m so glad you guys were here.” His excitement is splashed all over his features. From his big, goofy smile to the way he keeps talking, when in the past he would have fallen silent instead. “I thought I could hear you at one point in the bottom of the third when I threw that change-up.”

“You were hearing Knox about to kick some Chicago fan’s ass for razzing you,” Brogan says.

“Eh. It doesn’t faze me. It means I’m doing my job. If the other team starts clapping for me, then I know I’m screwed.”

“Back to Minnesota for the next game, huh?” Hendrick asks.

“Yeah. I know you won’t be able to make it, but if we win it looks like we’ll be in Kansas City for the next series.”

“We’ll be there,” Knox says. He glances at the rest of us.

“Yeah.” I nod. “Unless we have a team conflict, Brogan and I are there.”

“Awesome. Well, I should get going before the bus leaves me behind.”
Flynn steps forward and we all hug him at once.

As he walks off, we stare after him. When he gets about ten feet away, he turns back and lifts one hand in a wave.

ARCHER

“He’s pitching again tonight,” I say as we get close to Coach’s house. He lives outside of the city on several acres. His entire half-mile driveway is gravel, which is a point of contention for all the guys with sports cars.

I park my truck and kill the engine.

“And you brought me here?” she asks. “We could have gone somewhere and watched the game or even stayed home.”

The Twins lost the last two games, and it killed Flynn not to be in the game. He’s amped up and ready to go. I just know he’s going to have a great night.

I get out and walk around. Sabrina’s door is already open, but she waits for me to help her out.

“I promised I’d stop by,” I say. “Plus, I wouldn’t have seen this dress. You look so fucking sexy.”

She always does, but tonight she’s in a tight black dress with little straps and these strappy shoes that lace up around her ankles. The fact we made it here without me pulling over or turning back is a testament to my willpower.

Also, I felt like I owed her a real date. We’ve been hanging out a lot, a few hours here and there as our schedule allows, but I want to take her to fancy restaurants and out to parties and events. Outside of Olivia and a few other friends at Lilac Lounge, she hasn’t gotten to know that many people, and truth be told I’m happy to show her off to my circle.

My teammates all adore her, and it feels good to be by her side.

“Sexy, maybe, but not made for this truck. Help me.” She sticks out her bottom lip as she angles her legs and tries to get out of the truck.

“Happily.” I scoop her up into my arms and turn in a circle. She squeals and latches on to my neck.

I drop a kiss to her mouth as I come to a stop. When I pull back, she laughs and then reaches out and rubs her thumb along the top of my lip. “You’re wearing my lipstick.”

“Mmmm.” I kiss her again before setting her on the ground.

Inside, players and members of the coaching staff and their partners wander around the big house. It’s a lot of house, light and airy, and so not what I’d picture as Coach’s style. I’d picture him in a big log cabin or something, honestly. The man wears the same navy athletic pants and white polo shirt every day and drives an old Suburban that’s from the late nineties. But I’ve met his wife, and a few minutes of watching them together, it’s pretty clear that she calls most of the shots.

“This house is beautiful,” Sabrina says, looking up with wide eyes.

“Yeah. You like it?”

“Umm, yes.” She chuckles lightly. “More than like.”

The way she’s so lit up, I guess I can’t blame Coach. I’m half-tempted to buy a house just like this to keep the smile on Sabrina’s face, and I’ve been dating the girl for five seconds.

We find Brogan and London in the kitchen with Cody and Tripp.

“Hey! My favorite sister and my ex-best friend.” Brogan’s excitement is written all over his face when he spots us. He hugs Sabrina and then attempts to scowl at me, but it only lasts a few seconds before he busts up laughing.

I wrap an arm around Sabrina’s waist, and she leans into me. I notice Graham in the other room staring at us. He’s been more annoying than ever at practice, but this is the last place I want to get into it with him. I’m prepared to ignore him, but Graham steps forward and blocks our path.

“Sabrina, right? Nice to see you again.” His gaze drifts from her face down her body, just long enough for a flicker of annoyance to pass through me.

“Hi.” She steps back and molds herself to my side.

His stare moves back to me. “You two are a thing, huh?”

The way he asks the question, it’s clear he thinks that’s surprising for some reason.

I don’t bother answering him, but he’s not really looking for me to

anyway. Graham just likes to hear himself talk.

“I guess there’s no accounting for taste.” He winks playfully and takes a drink from his beer.

God, what an asshole.

He takes a step closer to us and I instinctively shift so I’m holding Sabrina just a tad behind me. It’s not like I think he’ll hurt her. I don’t think he’s that big of a jerk. I just don’t want him near her.

“So, Sabrina, what do you do?” he asks. “Model? Influencer? You’re a knockout.”

My brows lift higher, and a scoff leaves my lips. Is he fucking for real right now?

“What?” he asks me. “You don’t think she’s beautiful?”

Sabrina wraps a hand around my bicep, still leaning into me. Her touch stops me from taking his bait.

“I’m a dancer at Lilac Lounge,” she says brightly, and like she’s not at all bothered by his comment. I don’t know if she’s pretending for his sake or mine, but I suppose it wouldn’t be great to punch one of my teammates at Coach’s house.

“And she’s about to open a dance studio at Sixth and Lake,” I clarify.

“That still sounds weird.” A small laugh leaves her lips.

“Better get used to it,” I tell her, then kiss her again. I can’t seem to help it. Then I look at Graham. “It’s going to be the best one in the city. You should see what she did to the place. It was basically an abandoned warehouse until she cleaned it up.”

“I had some help.” She nuzzles against me.

“Sixth and Lake is an up-and-coming area,” Graham says.

I resist rolling my eyes at him. Seriously, who says shit like that except real estate agents?

“Yeah, it’s a nice neighborhood,” Sabrina says, like she just can’t help being polite but doesn’t know what to say either.

“Excuse us,” I say without offering up more of an explanation as I pull her away from him. I meet Brogan’s stare long enough to see he’s smiling at our hasty exit.

“God, that guy is skeevy,” Sabrina says when we step outside.

“Right?” Relief floods through me. “Oh, I’m so glad you think so too.”

I wrap my arms around her and pull her to me, kissing her and probably getting lipstick all over my face again.

She laughs softly. "I already knew you didn't like him."

"Caught on to that, huh?" One side of my mouth lifts at the corner. I haven't tried to hide it, exactly, but when you're part of a team, it's a little like family, and I don't like to talk shit about my family. Even if I'd like to boot him out of said family.

"You're not that good at hiding it," she says against my lips.

"Maybe you're just more perceptive than most."

"When it comes to you, absolutely."

Slade interrupts our happy moment. Completely ignoring me, he pulls Sabrina into a big hug. Then proceeds to fawn all over my girl, admiring her in a way that has me clearing my throat and lifting a brow at him. Not that he seems to care about my reaction.

"Ooooh. Is this a new chain?" she asks, leaning closer to his chest to look at the diamond necklace he's wearing.

"Yep. Got it yesterday. You like?"

"I love. Are those emeralds?"

"Mhmm." He holds it up with a finger and she moves even closer.

Slade must feel me burning a hole into his forehead because he glances up at me. Then the fucker smirks.

Sabrina is going on about how the jewelry is so pretty, all while still standing way too close to my teammate who is enjoying riling me up.

"Wanna try it on?" he asks her.

"Oh, I couldn't."

"I insist." He reaches back and unhooks it, then places it around Sabrina's neck.

"It's heavy," she says. She turns to me. "What do you think?"

"You're gorgeous but, baby, if you don't take off Slade's necklace, I might have to punch my teammate."

Her mouth drops open, and she glances back at Slade's wide smirk. She swats at him. "Stop provoking my man."

"It's too easy, baby cakes."

She takes off the necklace and gives it back to Slade. As soon as she does, I wrap my arms around her waist from behind and pick her up.

"Aww, come back," Slade calls as I carry Sabrina away. His booming laugh is joined by several others. "Don't go, Holland. I'll stop hitting on your girl."

I lead her over to a quiet area. She's giggling when I set her down.

“Much better,” I say. There’s no one else around, just how I like it.

She turns to me and runs her hands up my chest. “That was unnecessary. Slade’s not really my type.”

“Too handsome?” I joke.

“His jewelry is better than mine.”

I laugh and she smiles back at me.

“I’ve missed you this week.”

“You have seen me every day,” she says.

“Still true.” My phone buzzes in my pocket. I hook one arm around her waist and fish it out with my other. “Sorry. My brothers have been blowing me up all night.”

I read through the texts. Knox went to Minnesota to watch the game and Hendrick is hosting a watch party at the bar. Both brothers have been sending messages all night. It’s a big deal and I think we might be more nervous than Flynn is about the game. Even Brogan has somehow found the time to join in.

“It’s fine. Tonight is a big night for all of you. What’s the score?”

“Still tied at one. Flynn’s pitching now.”

“Pull it up.” There’s excitement in her tone that matches my own.

“You want to watch the game?”

“Of course I do.”

With a grin, I open the game up on my phone and we huddle together to watch on the small screen. Flynn gets through another inning without letting anyone on base. I breathe a sigh of relief.

“He looks a lot like you,” Sabrina says.

“Yeah?” I ask.

She nods. “Why baseball?”

“He played basketball in high school too. Even had some offers for college scholarships, but baseball was always his number one passion.”

“Never football?”

“Nah.” I shake my head. “Three older brothers, four really with Brogan, he was more interested in paving his own way than following in our footsteps.”

“Big footsteps to fill.”

“Something tells me he’s going to be bigger than all of us. Twenty years old and stepping up for his team in October?” I shake my head. The pressure he must feel. Or fuck, maybe he doesn’t feel it at all.

“You’re proud of him. It’s sexy.” She lifts on to her toes and kisses me.

“Ooooh. I didn’t realize all this talk about my brother was turning you on.” I scrunch up my face.

“*You* turn me on.”

“I’d like to.” My hands slide down to her ass.

She taps me lightly with one finger and then motions with her chin behind me, indicating someone is there. I growl against her lips, nipping the bottom one before I turn around.

Brogan and London stand there amused.

“Oh, fuck, it’s just them.” I turn back around and kiss her again. She giggles into my mouth. When we break apart, I open my stance to let them in. I wonder how long until we can leave.

“Are you following the game?” Brogan asks.

“Of course.”

His grin widens. “Hendrick says the bar is more packed than it’s ever been. And Knox says it’s insane sitting at the game and listening to the home crowd chanting Flynn’s name.”

“I am on the same group text thread as you.” Truth be told I love hearing it, even for the second time.

“God I wish we were there.” He can barely contain his excitement. On a daily basis, Brogan is the unrestrained version of my feelings. While I’m more reserved, he wears his emotions on his sleeve.

“Same.”

Sabrina looks up at me all doe-eyed, reminding me of her comment a few moments ago.

“I’m *really* proud of Flynn,” I say, then brush my lips against hers.

When I pull back, she rolls her eyes, but she snuggles a little closer.

“Okay. Not sure what’s happening here, but you two aren’t allowed to have inside jokes without me.” Brogan waggles a finger between me and Sabrina.

“I’m sorry,” I say, faking guilt. “Did you want to hear how your sister finds me sexy and I turn her on?”

Sabrina squeezes my arm, eyes wide. Her hands lift and she signs, *What the hell?*

Sorry, but it had to be done. He’s so nosey, I sign back.

“It’s funny because I know what you’re saying. Also, Arch?” He waits until I look at him, then flips me the bird.

Our foursome falls into more appropriate conversation while the patio fills with more of our teammates. Brogan and I continually check the game and group chat. Between the game, the texting, and kissing Sabrina every chance I get, I'm barely aware of anyone else at the party.

When both our phones buzz at the same time, I let him check it while I keep the video of Flynn up. It's the top of the fifth. He's been unhittable, but this current batter is the best in the league and it's a full count. Flynn winds up for the pitch and I hold my breath as he fires another fast ball and strikes out the best batter in the league. He's fucking incredible.

"What's it say?" I ask when I can finally pry my gaze away from the game.

Brogan glances up from his phone and stares at me a beat. I can tell instantly from his expression something is up.

"Knox ran into your dad."

My jaw tightens. I'm not all that surprised, but it still sours the mood.

"Do you think Flynn is funding his trips?" Brogan asks.

"Probably." I don't know what Dad's been doing for money. At one time he drove a truck, but that can't be the case if he's following Flynn around to games.

"Flynn's smart and Knox is keeping an eye on him." Brogan gives me what I think is meant to be a reassuring smile but thinking about him has my mood plummeting and fuck that. I'm out with my girl. He doesn't get to ruin this. I'll talk with Knox and with Flynn later.

Coach steps outside, bringing the rest of the party with him. He makes a quick speech, thanking us for coming and telling us to enjoy the food, then invites us all to check out the items in the silent auction.

There are tables on one side of the yard filled with items to bid on. Sabrina drags me by each one. I'm only half-looking, lost in my thoughts.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

"Yeah. Great." I blink a few times and stare at the spa day package in front of me.

I wave my hand toward it to see if she's interested, and Sabrina shakes her head.

"I'd rather have the Holland jersey back there."

"I'll get you one of those for free." I sign my name at the bottom of the spa package anyway. The charity is a good one. They're local and support at-risk youth so I don't really care if I win. I'm just happy to support them.

When we're done looking, Sabrina and I wander over to a quiet spot in the yard.

"What's going on in that handsome skull of yours?" she asks, lacing her fingers behind my neck.

"Sorry. I guess I'm not a very good date tonight."

"It's not that. I can just tell something is wrong."

I blow out a breath, already feeling better. There is something about Sabrina and her ability to read me so well that puts me at ease.

"My dad being at the game tonight got to me," I admit. "He's been following Flynn around for the last couple of years, going to all his games and..."

"You wish he had done that for you?"

"No," I say automatically. "Maybe. I'm not sure. The thing is, he didn't. Not for me or Hendrick or Knox. Then a couple of years ago he decided he wanted to be there for us like nothing had happened. The rest of us made it clear we weren't interested, but Flynn let him back into his life."

Sabrina says nothing, but her stare remains on me as she listens.

"If I'm honest, I didn't think it would last this long." Just like all the times before, I figured Dad would cut out after a month or two. "Flynn has so much going for him right now. I don't want to see our dad take advantage of him."

"I am so sorry. I don't know all the details, but I can't imagine what it was like for you. Then or now."

"I had my mom and my brothers growing up. I didn't really feel his loss. Not the same way that the others did." Hendrick and Knox filled that role for me after Mom died, and I accepted that some people weren't meant to be parents. Or I thought I'd accepted it. I hate that he still gets under my skin.

"Wanna know a secret?"

She doesn't miss a beat. "I want to know everything about you."

"I lost my hearing when I was ten years old," I say, then smile slightly. "That isn't the secret."

"How did it happen?" she asks.

"It was this freak accident. I was riding my bike, going too fast down a hill and I crashed, hit a street sign just right, I guess. It wasn't immediate, or at least I don't think so. My head was ringing, and I was dazed. I walked back home. I had a concussion and a broken wrist. Went into the emergency room thinking I was going to have a badass cast and walked out to a completely

different world.”

I swallow thickly. “The secret is that I’m the reason our dad left. Don’t get me wrong, he was in and out before then, but after my accident, he split for almost a year. And when he did come back, it was only because Mom was sick.”

“Archer,” she whispers my name.

I clear my throat and force my stare to remain on her face instead of looking away.

“Whatever the reason he left, that’s on him. It says everything about his character and nothing about yours.” Her brown eyes stare hard at me. “You get that, right?”

I nod.

“Okay, but do you really?”

“Yeah.” A small chuckle slips out. “I really do.”

She steps closer until our bodies are flush and presses her mouth to mine. When she pulls back, she signs, *Thank you for telling me your secret.*

“You’re welcome.”

“Want to hear one of mine?”

“Yeah.” Anything to lighten the mood. This is why I don’t like talking about my dad. It just brings up all the old shit. I don’t want to live in the past. I like my life now. But I worry about Flynn.

“I’m really glad I met you.”

“I’m really glad I met you too.”

SABRINA

“Try on the red one,” I say, pointing to the dress Olivia holds in her right hand. In her other, she has a basic black one that she wears on every first date. It’s nice but doesn’t do justice to her killer body. And so far—unlucky.

“Red feels like too much for a movie date.”

“You’re going to the movies?” I ask, unable to hide my surprise.

“It’s a private screening. His friend produced the movie or directed.” She moves around her bedroom to stand in front of the floor-length mirror, holding the dress in front of her body.

She shakes her head and puts it back in her closet without trying it on. “I’m sticking with the black dress. If he doesn’t like me in this, he won’t like me in my ratty sweats.”

“You’ll look stunning no matter what.” I move to lie on her bed. I missed this. Hanging out in her room, talking, trying on clothes.

“Maybe I should just call it off now. Hanging with you and Greer sounds less stressful. Plus, I could put on my sweats.”

“No way. We’re going to eat chicken nuggets and french fries and too much ice cream while watching princess movies.”

“That sounds pretty perfect.” Olivia laughs as she sits down beside me. I can feel the weight of her stress about this date. I don’t know why she stresses. If the date doesn’t go great, it’s all the guy’s fault—not hers. She’s incredible. And I’m not just saying that because I’m her best friend.

“I don’t know how many more bad dates I can go on. Was it always this

hard?" She puts her head in my lap. "I used to think about the days when Greer would be old enough that I could make some time for myself again and now it all feels like a huge waste of time. Maybe I missed my dating prime."

"You did not." I laugh softly but run my fingers through her hair in a reassuring manner. "You're twenty-three, not one hundred."

She groans again as if my words did nothing to soothe her. "I thought I was going to have my whole life figured out by this age."

"We all did," I assure her.

"Now look at us."

"Hey, I have no complaints on how I'm going to spend my evening."

"That's because when I get back, you're going home to your hot man."

My lips pull into a wide grin. Yes, yes, I am. "Don't forget about the chicken nuggets and ice cream."

She laughs, but it sounds strained.

"Come on. Tonight could be great. This guy, what's his name again?"

"Bradley."

"Bradley could sweep you off your feet, and by Christmastime, Greer will have a new daddy."

An unladylike snort leaves her as she sits up. "I don't know about that. Greer is still holding out hope for her real daddy to stop being such a selfish prick."

"She deserves better," I say, anger filling me at the thought of anyone leaving precious Greer and not wanting to be in her life. I get that parenting is different than being the fun aunt who babysits and lets you eat too much bad food.

"Ugh. Make me feel better. Tell me something terrible about Archer." Olivia moves to her mirror with her makeup bag.

"I'm sorry. If there is anything terrible, I haven't found it yet."

She shoots me a smile over her shoulder. "Wow. Nothing?"

"He's sweet, attentive, an unbelievable kisser..." I trail off, continuing to list a dozen more things I adore about him in my head. The man is not only incredibly considerate in his everyday actions, he's the most attentive guy I've ever slept with. It's like he doesn't enjoy sex unless I do. What a novel concept.

When I glance up, Olivia is fighting a laugh.

"You've got it so bad." Her lips pull into a wide smile.

There's really no use in denying it. Olivia knows me too well to believe

me if I lied anyway.

“I do, but it’s still new and casual, so we’re keeping that between us.”

This time she doesn’t hold back her laughter. “I see. Playing it cool until you have the talk about it being more serious?”

“I don’t even know if he wants serious.”

“Have you asked him?” Olivia coats her lips in a fiery red.

“No. I’m waiting for him to bring it up.”

She wipes off the lipstick and reaches for a more neutral shade. “Maybe he’s waiting for you to bring it up.”

“Oh yes, guys love it when women want to talk about relationship stuff.”

“I get the feeling Archer is different. Or at least, different when it comes to you.”

She turns to face me. Her makeup is simple, but she’s already stunning. “How do I look?”

“Hot. Like *super* hot.”

She laughs off my compliment.

“We’re both princesses,” Greer says from the doorway. She’s wearing her Princess Peach costume from last Halloween.

“Oh no. I forgot my princess dress!” I say with an exaggerated pout that turns into a grin at my favorite five-year-old.

“You can wear my Elsa tiara, Auntie Brina.”

“Oh, thank goodness.” I grin at her and get up from the bed.

The three of us head out to the living room of the apartment where Greer’s princess costume supplies are strewn around.

“What happened in here?” Olivia asks, taking it in with wide eyes.

“I brought out all my dresses for the princess fashion show.”

Olivia glances from her daughter to me with an amused expression.

“And we’ll put everything away when we’re done. Won’t we?” I nod and Greer reluctantly does the same.

With a small laugh, Olivia grabs her purse and then goes to Greer and squats down. “Be good for Aunt Sabrina. Don’t stay up too late. And don’t eat so much that you hurt your stomach.”

There’s a little flicker of sadness on Greer’s face as she seems to realize her mother’s impending departure. I’ve stayed with Greer before, so I know she’ll be fine, but she adores her mom more than anyone else in the world.

“Love you, jellybean.” They embrace and then Olivia stands. Greer goes back to her mountain of costumes, and I walk Olivia to the door.

“Text me if you need anything,” she says.

“I won’t. We’ll be fine.”

“Okay, then text me pictures of the princess fashion show or I’ll feel left out.”

Laughing, I hug her. “You got it.”

With one more hesitant look at her daughter, she heads out the door.



Three hours later, Greer and I have eaten an entire package of dinosaur shaped chicken nuggets, shared a very large bowl of strawberry ice cream, and tried on every single princess dress, tiara, and accessory she owns.

A knock on the apartment door interrupts our second screening of Moana. I go silent and wait for it again. When it comes, I pull myself up from our blanket fort.

“This is the best part!” Greer protests.

“I’ll be right back.” I cross over quickly to the front door and pull it wide, expecting UPS or Amazon.

“What are you doing here?” I ask as I stare at Archer standing in the hallway.

His gaze rakes over me and his lips pull apart, flashing a sexy smirk. I lift a hand to the tiara perched on top of my head. I’m also wearing a tulle skirt and about ten beaded necklaces. Oh, and how could I forget the lipstick and blush that Greer decided we needed.

“I thought you might need some help babysitting, but I see you have everything under control.”

“We’re having a princess party.” I think I’m still in shock because I just stare at him. He’s in jeans and a Henley with a navy Mavericks hat.

He steps close and brushes a kiss to my lips. “You’re a very pretty princess.” The gruffness in his voice makes my stomach flip. “And I missed the hell out of you so please say it’s okay I’m here.”

“It’s okay. More than okay.” I finally snap out of it and wrap my arms around his neck. I breathe him in. How is it possible to miss someone so much in such a short amount of time? He kisses me again, but this time we’re interrupted by Greer.

“Aunt Brina?” Her sweet voice is hesitant as she calls for me. Oops,

forgot about the child. I step away from Archer and turn to her.

“We have a guest.”

She stands up in the middle of our fort. We pulled several blankets and all the pillows to make a cozy spot for watching the movies. I can’t guess what her reaction is going to be. With her dad out of the picture, she doesn’t have a lot of men Archer’s age hanging around. Olivia is very careful about the guys she dates and who she lets meet her daughter.

Archer leaves me and walks right up to her, squatting down at eye-level.

“Hey, I’m Archer.” He holds out a big hand to her. “Remember me?”

She eyes it wearily. “You’re the guy that said he wasn’t Aunt Brina’s boyfriend.”

I open my mouth to save him, but Archer beats me. “I wised up and took your advice.”

“You did?” She swivels her head to me and then back.

“Yep. And she told me you were having the best princess party. I had to come see for myself. Is that okay?”

She shrugs one shoulder. “I guess so. Do you like Moana?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen it.”

Her eyes go comically wide. “You haven’t?”

He shakes his head. “Is it any good?”

“She isn’t a princess, but she’s friends with the ocean.”

“Ooh.” Archer looks like he has no idea what to say to that, but she takes his hand finally and leads him over to her costumes.

In minutes, she has him decked out in necklaces and a tiara on his head. Archer is a good sport, even when she asks about his hearing aids.

“What are they?” she asks as he takes off his hat and adjusts the crown on top of his head.

“They help me hear.”

“Do I need them?” She places both hands over her own ears.

“Not unless you can’t hear without them. Can you hear me?”

She nods.

“What about now?” he asks in a whisper.

She nods again.

“I think you’re good.”

Greer drops it after that and while she catches him up on Moana, I text Olivia to see how her date is going and to let her know Archer is here.

When I rejoin them, Greer has pulled my boyfriend down into the fort

and is sitting next to him, explaining everything on the screen.

As I approach, he looks up at me and flashes a sheepish grin.

“Aren’t you a pretty princess,” I say.

“Damn straight.”

My brows lift and he coughs, wide eyes glancing over to Greer.

“You said a bad word,” she supplies helpfully.

“Oops. Sorry.” He smiles softly. “Can I still be a pretty princess?”

She thinks for a moment. “I don’t see why not. My mom says sometimes bad words slip out on accident. I bet even princesses slip up sometimes too.”

We watch in silence for a while. Greer is captivated and Archer sneaks a glance at me wearing a sexy smile.

When a big storm with lightning and ominous music happens on screen, Greer climbs farther onto his lap. She’s basically sitting on him at this point. And she stays there until the movie is over.

Her eyes are barely open until the credits roll and then she snaps to attention.

“Can we watch it again?!” she pleads.

“Not tonight.” I stop the movie. “Go brush your teeth and get changed for bed, munchkin.”

“Do I have to?” Her bright green eyes get all big and sweet. I have no idea how her mother stays strong all the time.

I bop her on the nose. “Yep. Princesses need sleep.”

She lets out a sigh and heads toward the bathroom with her shoulders slumped and her long gown trailing behind her like a train.

“Cute kid,” Archer says when the water starts in the bathroom.

“Yeah. The cutest.” And speaking of the cutest, damn he looks good. Even dressed up in Greer’s princess accessories. No, especially dressed up. I can’t believe he was so chill about it all. My heart is officially a puddle for this man.

“You’re good with her.” I tug at the beaded necklaces wrapped around his wrist and he uses the opportunity to capture my hand and thread our fingers together.

“She’s fun.”

“Do you want kids someday?” I ask, then realize that might be a weird question to ask someone you just started dating. If he’s freaked out though, he doesn’t show it.

His brows pinch together. “I’m not sure. I think so.”

“You haven’t thought about it?”

“I guess I haven’t really.” He brings our joined hands up and then tugs me closer, brushing his lips over mine before asking, “What about you?”

“Yeah. I do. Not soon or anything, but someday. I think I want to adopt like my parents did.”

One side of his smile quirks higher. “Really?”

I nod.

“You’re a good human, Sabrina Whitlock.”

His words warm my insides. “Because I want to adopt?”

“One of the many reasons.”

“Is that something you’d be okay with?” I ask. I guess we’ve moved past this being an awkward conversation, so I might as well know if we’re compatible in that area.

“Absolutely,” he says with so little thought that I’m not sure I believe him. Adopting is a big deal and lots of people decide against it or maybe never consider it at all.

Archer reaches up and brushes my hair away from my face, then straightens my tiara.

“You haven’t thought about having kids, but you know how you feel about adoption?” I ask, trying to make sense of his certainty on the subject. “Sorry, I’m just trying to understand. It’s such a big thing to be so sure.”

“It isn’t that I’ve never thought about kids, but it always felt like this thing that could happen in the future. You know, find the perfect girl, get married, have some babies.”

I chuckle softly. “Just like that, huh?”

He wears a wolfish grin that makes my stomach flip. “I checked off the first one, so I guess the others aren’t so far-fetched anymore.”

If I were perfect, I’d know what to say to that. God, he’s just so... unbelievable.

“As for adoption, my mom didn’t officially adopt Brogan or anything, but she might as well have. And it was the best thing that ever happened to me. To our whole family.”

“Right.” I feel like an idiot for not considering that sooner. Archer wasn’t adopted, but he knows what it’s like to welcome someone into his family that isn’t related by blood.

I bring my free hand up to cup his cheek. He hasn’t shaved for a day or two and his stubble is rough under my palm. “You’re kind of perfect too.”

His big, cocky grin returns. "Obviously."

His mouth crashes down over mine, but before I can fully devour him, Greer comes running back out.

"All done!" she proclaims and weasels her way between us, sitting so she's half on my lap and half on Archer's lap. She has two of her very favorite princess books on her lap. Okay, technically they're my favorites. She has special books she reads with her mom and ones she saves to read with me. She has two dancing cat books that she only ever wants me to read her.

"Can Archer read to me tonight?" she asks me. I try not to feel betrayed. I guess I'm not the only one that thinks he's perfect.

"You'll have to ask him."

Greer and I glance over at Archer together.

"Will you read us a bedtime story?" I ask and sign in case he didn't catch her question the first time.

His mouth opens and a flash of panic crosses his face for just a moment before he recovers. He smiles at Greer. "Only if you promise to help me sound out the really big words."

She giggles. "I can't read yet."

"Oh no," he whines, really selling it. "Well, I guess maybe Sabrina can help."

"She's a really good reader." Greer nods enthusiastically and Archer meets my gaze over her head.

Pride swells in my chest. Greer's opinion is top tier in my book.

"Well, challenge accepted." Archer holds out his hand and Greer places the book in it.

Thirty minutes later, Archer has read my favorite books, plus six others. I'm as captivated as Greer. She's fighting sleep to keep listening to him. Her eyes are barely open, but every time he stops talking, they fly open. She's also fully placed herself on his lap now.

He looks pretty great with a little kid half-asleep in his arms.

I stand and motion for him to do the same. He stops reading and I quickly sign, *Keep reading!*

He does, somehow managing to balance the book and Greer while getting to his feet. I lead him to her room. I turn on her side lamp and pull back the covers, then turn to take a now fully asleep kid from him.

"You look real good right now," I tell him.

He winks and I take her carefully from his arms. She wraps her arms around my neck. "Night, Aunt Brina."

My heart squeezes. "Night, munchkin."

I kiss her forehead and place her down on her bed and pull the blanket up. Then Archer and I creep out of her room quietly, and I close the door most of the way, leaving it open just a crack.

I rest my back against the wall. It always feels like a major accomplishment getting her to bed. Archer blows out a breath and runs a hand through his hair, forgetting the tiara and sending it askew. He takes it off and holds it in his fingers.

"How many books does that kid own?"

"Many, many more. Sometimes we have to read her favorites twice."

He brings a hand up to his throat and lifts his chin. "I think I was one story away from losing my voice."

"Oh, you poor thing." I step closer and drape my arms around his shoulders.

Archer wears a satisfied smirk as I bring my lips to his.

"What can I do to help?" I murmur the question as he curls an arm around my waist.

He hums, nips my bottom lip, and then pushes me back against the wall.

"You're a very pretty princess." His gruff voice has a direct line to my pussy.

I wrap one leg around his waist, and he nudges farther between my legs. My eyes flutter closed, and I revel in the sensations. His touch alone is enough to have me aching for him.

I'm vaguely aware of a noise somewhere in the apartment, but it isn't until Olivia clears her throat that I open my eyes. My best friend stands just inside the front door with an amused expression on her face.

I squeeze Archer's bicep. He hasn't heard her come in and is still lavishing my neck, sucking and biting and sending goosebumps across my skin. He looks up lazily. At my expression, he glances behind us.

Olivia waves at him.

"Oh shit," he mutters quietly.

Laughing, I extract myself from him. "Hey. You're back early. We just got Greer down for bed."

She goes straight for the refrigerator, opens the freezer, and pulls out a pint of ice cream. Next she goes to the silverware drawer and gets a giant

spoon.

“Uh oh,” I say, reading the signs of what must have been a terrible date. “That bad?”

“Worse.” She shovels a big scoop of chocolate ice cream. It’s so big she can barely fit it in her mouth.

Archer and I approach. I go to the drawer and get a spoon for myself. No one should have to eat their feelings alone. Archer hangs back and glances away like he’s trying to give us privacy as I pull myself to sit on the counter beside her.

“What happened?” I ask her.

She takes another bite and passes me the container before answering. “He spent the entire night flirting with other women in front of me, then when it was time to go, he started really laying on the charm. ‘You’re so beautiful.’ ‘I had such a great time tonight.’ ‘What do you say we go back to my place. I have a feeling we’d have really great chemistry.’” She makes a gagging sound. “I should have worn the red dress. Maybe he wouldn’t have been hitting on other women all night.”

“Screw him. You’re hot. Him flirting with other women has nothing to do with you and everything to do with his self-esteem issues.”

She makes a harrumph noise.

“Tell her she’s hot.” I nudge Archer, then sign the words in case he missed it the first time.

His brows lift and he looks from me to Olivia and back like he’s certain this is a trap.

“You are very hot,” he tells her, but he’s not exactly selling it.

“Superhot,” I add.

“Yeah, well, this superhot woman is not going out on another date for a very long time. I can’t take it. It’s exhausting.” She finally lets out a long exhale and I can tell she’s successfully brushing off the bad night. At least a little. “How was Greer?”

“A perfect angel as always.”

“How many books did she make you read at bedtime?”

“None.”

Olivia stops with the spoon halfway to her mouth. “None?”

I fight a smile. “She didn’t make *me* read any, but Archer had to read fourteen books.”

Olivia’s gaze slides to my boyfriend. *My boyfriend*—that’s something I

still need to tell her.

“She’s a real cute kid,” he says, chuckling softly.

“I’m impressed. It usually takes her awhile to warm up to men,” Olivia says.

Archer’s face turns a soft shade of pink.

I manage to get one more scoop of ice cream before she puts the top on. “Okay. I’m not eating any more calories because of that guy. This dress already feels like it’s going to pop at the seams.”

She puts the ice cream in the freezer and our spoons in the dishwasher.

“Thank you for tonight.” She walks to me, and I hop down from the counter and hug her.

“Any time. We had fun.”

“Yes, I saw.”

“Sorry.” I chuckle. Archer smiles a little sheepish and a little cocky. He wraps both arms around my waist and I nuzzle into him.

“Don’t be. That’s more action than this place has seen in a while.”

“Mom?” Greer’s voice calls from her room.

Olivia smiles at us again as she heads to check on her daughter.

“We’re going to pick up and then get out of here,” I say.

“Leave it. I’ll do it tomorrow.”

“No way.”

“If you won’t let me pay you, then you can’t be cleaning my house in addition to babysitting.” She points a no-nonsense stare at me.

“Fine,” I relent. “Lunch tomorrow?”

“Yeah, I’ll swing by the studio.” She nods, then glances at Archer. “Better get out of here before she makes you read twenty more books.”

Archer’s body shakes with quiet laughter. “Nice to see you again.”

We grab our things and leave. As soon as we’re out the door, Archer pulls me back to him and drops his mouth to mine.

“Come home with me?” he asks between kisses.

“I do live there.”

“Yeah, I know, but stay with me. I want to fall asleep with you in my arms and wake up the same way.”

My stomach does that funny swoop thing again. “Okay, boyfriend.”

His smirk reappears and he nips at my bottom lip. “I can’t wait to feel you scream that later.”

ARCHER

We have a home game Monday night against Seattle. Brogan and I are on the field warming up. Music around the stadium is hyping up the crowd. Fall finally hit Arizona, and I love the chill in the air. It reminds me of late nights back in Valley, staying after everyone else was gone. Just me and Brogan, neither of us wanting to go home.

I can't imagine playing this game without him. We've been fortunate to stay together. High school, college, now the Mavericks. I love this game, but I can no longer separate football from playing with Brogan. It's my hope that I'll never have to find out what it's like to play without him, but if I do, I wonder if I'd still love it.

Glancing over at the crowd, I look for Sabrina. She and London are coming tonight, but they haven't arrived yet.

"They'll be here," Brogan says when I look back at him. He has a knowing grin. "You'll get used to it."

"What?"

"Having your girlfriend in the stands. I was so nervous the first few times London came. Especially before we were official. I wanted to impress her so badly."

"It isn't that."

He doesn't look like he believes me.

"She doesn't make me nervous. She makes me calmer somehow. I can't explain it. It's like having family in the crowd. It feels right."

He pauses his warmups to stare at me. I fear I might have said too much.

“Well, fuck. That’s some real romantic shit.”

A rough chuckle shakes my chest.

“Holland!” Graham steps into my line of sight, killing my good mood instantly.

“Graham.” I tip my head to him and hope he’ll keep right on going. But of course, I’m not that fucking lucky.

“Thinking about making some catches tonight?” He flashes a taunting grin.

“That’s the plan.”

“Well don’t worry about it if you can’t get it done. I’m feeling good tonight.” He bounces around on his toes, swinging his arms loose. “Jump in the backpack, Holland. I’ll carry us to a W.”

My glare finally sends him moving along.

“God, I fucking hate that guy,” I mutter when he’s out of earshot.

“Don’t let him get in your head. He knows you’re the better player.”

“Not lately.” I’m not getting open and when I do, I’m not performing like I should. Brogan’s right, I need to keep him out of my head, but it’s easier said than done.

As the game nears kickoff, we head to the sideline. During the pregame announcements I run through all my starts in my head, then visualize myself getting open and scoring touchdowns.

I glance over at where London and Sabrina should be sitting, but their seats are still empty. She’ll be here. I know she will, but I wish I could see her, just for a second, before stepping back out onto the field.

The noise during a game is deafening. At least that’s what other guys tell me. I’m used to the rumble of background noise. Sure, I can tell there’s more of it, but it’s easy to ignore it and focus on Cody and Coach as I listen and watch for signals.

They’re both good at making adjustments for me. Brogan does too, though I doubt he even realizes it anymore. Any time we’re on the field together, he glances at me as we head for the line of scrimmage to make sure I know the play.

He does that now as Cody claps his hands together and our offense breaks to take our spots. I nod at Brogan, and he returns the gesture. Such a small thing that means more than he could ever know.

Adrenaline pumps as I wait for the snap. Those seconds always feel like

the longest. Despite the noise vying for my attention, the only thing I hear is my own heartbeat.

And then Cody has the ball and chaos erupts. My feet move almost of their own mind. Thinking takes too long when it comes to getting past the defensive line. I rely on the hours of practice running routes. I trust the play and myself as I sprint then look back for Cody. He goes to Tripp on the other side of the field with slightly less coverage and the defenders shift in that direction.

We move down the field slowly, fighting off Seattle's defense. On third down, Cody finally finds me open. As soon as I catch the ball, I take off with two defenders hot on my heels. I feel one of the guys get a grip on my shoulder and I lean forward out of his grasp, and the ball slips loose.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

There are only two jobs in receiving. Catch the ball and hold the fuck onto it no matter what.

Seattle covers it quickly and the crowd groans their disgust at me.

"You alright?" Brogan asks as he helps me to my feet. Taking hard hits never really gets easier, but as long as I'm not injured, I know it'll pass quickly.

I groan and sign back, *Not dead yet.*

Though I kind of wish I were right now. Fuck. I can't believe I fumbled the ball. One fucking job.

"Shake it off," he says as we head to the sideline.

I nod my head. I take off my helmet, resist the urge to throw it, and grab water while I take a second to be pissed at myself. Brogan's right, I have to shake it off before I go back out there so I don't make more careless mistakes.

Graham steps in front of me wearing a sympathetic smile. "Damn, Holland, you're making me look good lately. I thought I was going to have some real competition on this team but you're practically handing me my next contract."

That smile that was all fake concern turns to a smirk. "Try to put up a little fight. Otherwise, it won't feel as good when they trade your ass."

He walks off before I can get the "fuck you" out of my mouth.

By halftime, we're down by fourteen points and the mood in the locker room is quiet frustration. I don't see a lot of time on the field after that and when I do it's like I can't remember how to get open.

The final score has us losing to Seattle by an embarrassing thirty-four to six.

As we're heading off the field, I glance up in the stands. In the midst of the shitty game, I forgot about Sabrina and London being here. I hold in a groan. The first game she comes to as my girlfriend and I play like shit.

Brogan nudges me and tips his head toward them. He leads the way to them, bypassing reporters and cameras.

Sabrina's smile is soft and unsure as we approach. I hate to imagine what my face looks like right now. I've never been great at masking my emotions. If I'm pissed, I look pissed. But I don't want her to think it's about anything but me.

Brogan reaches up and hugs London.

"Sorry about the game," she says to him, placing a kiss on his lips. I look to Sabrina.

"Hey," she says as tentative as she looks.

I attempt a smile and jut my chin, then move closer so I can hug her.

"*That sucked,*" she says, and pulls back just enough to sign it as well.

A real honest laugh bubbles up in my chest. "It sure fucking did. Sorry you had to see that."

Her brows pinch together. "What kind of fair-weather girlfriend do you think I am?"

"I..." Well, damn. That's about the best thing she could have said. Warmth spreads through my chest and I pull her tighter to me, claiming her mouth.

It's easy to forget that I'm not only a football player. It's what I do, and I love it, but it's a fickle ass game.

When we finally break apart, I've somehow managed to shake off the loss and my shitty performance.

"You'll get 'em next time." She makes half a heart with her pointer and middle finger on one hand, holding it out to me.

I do the same, placing my half up to hers.

ARCHER

The next morning, I report to the stadium for treatment and meetings. Walking into the building has all the frustrations of the game re-emerging.

I have been waiting for moments to show I can contribute to the team. Last night the opportunities were there, and I blew it.

Not even an hour-long massage can work out all the stress I'm carrying in my shoulders and neck. Especially when I get to my position meeting and we're reviewing game film.

My fumble has played on a constant loop since it happened but seeing it on the screen is a whole other kind of torture.

Coach pauses the video. I look straight ahead, but I can feel Graham's gaze and I just know the asshole is grinning without looking at him.

"Holland, you did a good job of getting open last night. You caught a tough break but keep giving yourself good looks and things will start going your way."

I nod. "Yes, sir."

"Speaking of, we've got the Vikings at home this week. Same groupings, same starters. We'll spend the rest of the week preparing for their defense."

"Wait a second." Graham sits forward in his seat, drawing everyone's attention. "Same starters? Don't you think we should switch things up after that disastrous game?"

I know he's talking about me, since the other starting receiver rarely changes. Bobby is a seven-year veteran and the most consistent player we

have. So what Graham is really asking is why the hell am I getting to start again after arguably my worst performance this season?

To be fair, I'm asking myself the same question. He's still an asshole though.

Coach's jaw tightens as he studies Graham for a beat. "Why don't you let me worry about the roster and you can focus on improving your footwork. I don't remember you getting into the end zone last night either."

Oh shit. I fight a smile, knowing it's not appropriate but loving that Graham got scolded.

"That's all. See you tomorrow." Coach walks out without another word.

"This isn't over, Holland," Graham says just loud enough that I can hear his pathetic threat. He stands and shoots me an angry glare as he storms toward the door.

The rest of the guys are slower, some even giving me nods that I take as encouragement but might also be pity.



Brogan cackles as I repeat the story to him later. London and Sabrina went out for drinks and we're watching the Twins game at home.

"Oh man, I wish I'd been there." Brogan smiles big as he lets his head lean back against the couch. "Graham is such a fucking prick."

"I mean, he probably only said what the others were thinking, but it did feel good." A hint of a smile pulls at my lips.

Brogan's expression shifts and he sits forward, elbows resting on his knees. "Fuck that. You had a tough game, but it happens. I think it's smart that Coach is letting you start again. It gives you a chance to shake it off."

Yeah. Maybe.

Our attention moves to the TV as the inning changes and Flynn walks out to the pitcher's mound. It's the second time he's pitched during this series, and I know he has to be tired.

But it's a make-or-break game and in my experience, you can push through a lot when it matters. The Twins are down in the series two to three. A loss tonight ends their season. I texted with Flynn earlier and he seemed relaxed and ready to go, but there's no way he isn't feeling the pressure.

Which is exactly what the announcers are saying as Flynn throws the first

pitch of the sixth inning. It's high and inside. The batter moves away from the plate, shooting Flynn a glare.

"Ooooh." Brogan covers his mouth with a fist, then claps his hands in front of him. "You've got this, Baby Holland."

The next pitch goes over the catcher's head. I don't hear anything the announcers are saying after that. I focus only on Flynn. His expression is filled with determination and frustration. Flynn has been hot so I don't blame the Twins coach for sticking with my brother, but I can see how tired he is. It's subtle and probably not obvious to anyone else, but it's in the way he shifts his shoulders and works his jaw back and forth.

The first batter gets a single off a fastball. Then Flynn walks the next two batters. I can practically feel the tension as I watch him prepare for the next pitch. He shakes off the catcher's signal twice before nodding.

"Come on, Baby Holland," Brogan mutters.

I barely breathe as Flynn winds up. The crack of the bat makes my stomach sink and when it sails over the wall for a grand slam, I sink back into the couch.

"Well fuck," I say.

When the women get back, Brogan and I are still sitting on the couch, staring at the TV. The game is over. Flynn got pulled after the grand slam and the Twins lost. It feels worse to watch him lose than it did fumbling the ball last night.

I get up and kiss Sabrina hello. "How was your night?"

"Good." She smiles then lets it fall. "I saw the final score of the Twins game. I'm sorry."

"Thanks." I wrap my arms around her. "Not the ending we were all hoping for, but he had a hell of a season."

"He did. You Holland boys are pretty impressive. Especially you." She tries to wink but both eyes close instead of just one.

"Are you drunk, baby?" I ask with a chuckle.

"No, but I am just tipsy enough that all I can think about is having sex with you," she whispers and signs.

Another rough chuckle leaves my lips. "I don't even need to be tipsy for that to be true for me."

She bites the corner of her lip. "Want to listen to some Ariana?"

I scoop her up without warning. She squeals next to my ear and her body shakes with laughter as I carry her toward my room shouting "Night" to

anyone listening.

Inside my bedroom, I shut the door with my foot and then set her down in front of me.

Squatting down, I glide my hand up her leg and under her skirt. She quivers as I hook my fingers along the band of her panties and pull them down. She steps out of them and then I lift her right leg and hook it over my shoulder.

“Baby, you’re so fucking beautiful,” I say as I push her skirt up around her hips. Leaning in, I kiss her softly on the inside of her thigh.

She squeezes my bicep twice and I stop, glancing up at her.

“What about Ariana?” she asks.

With a little maneuvering I manage to get my phone out of my front pocket and give her exactly what she wants.

“All good?” I ask.

She nods with a pleased smile, but as soon as I bring my mouth back to her pussy, her smile softens and morphs into something that looks a lot like bliss.

Her fingers thread through my hair, and as I devour her, she grips me like maybe she’s as gone for me as I am for her.

SABRINA

On Wednesday, Archer surprises me at the studio in the late afternoon.

“Wow. I still can’t believe this is the same space,” he says, turning in a circle to admire it.

Pride spreads through me at his words. I can’t believe it either. I spent all day working on the website and creating a couple of social media pages for outreach.

“Me either. It’s really happening.”

“I’m so proud of you.” He leans over and kisses me, circling my waist in the middle of it to drag me closer.

I could very easily lose hours of my day kissing Archer. When he pulls back, I actually whimper.

“Give me two seconds to lock the front door and we can keep doing that,” I say. I’m a total goner.

“I’d like nothing more, but I have a surprise.”

“What?” I ask, feeling a little thrill shoot through me.

“It’s a *surprise*.” He kisses my forehead. “Are you done here?”

“Yeah. I can be. Can I kiss you during this surprise?”

“Absolutely. In fact, I think this surprise demands it.”

“Well now I’m really curious.”

He winks and I hurry to close down my laptop and pack up. I follow him in my car back to the apartment. Brogan and London are waiting for us outside. London is in black jeans and a cute crop top and Brogan has on a

button-down short-sleeved shirt. They aren't super dressy but they look good, and I'm in leggings and a baggy T-shirt.

"I don't think I'm dressed for whatever we're doing."

"You look hot," Archer says.

Brogan glares playfully at him.

"What? She does. Get over it." Archer wraps his arms around me from behind.

"I got this." London steps forward and takes my hand, pulling me away from Archer. "Give us fifteen minutes."

"But—" Brogan starts to protest.

"Fifteen," she says in a voice that leaves no room for arguing. Then kisses the air in his direction. "Love you."

"Love you too," he grumbles. "But we're going to be late."



Despite his rumblings, when we pull up to the event parking lot thirty minutes later, there are tons of people still arriving and walking up to the stadium.

I crane my neck toward the entrance for any hint of what we're doing. I'm the only one who doesn't know, and my curiosity is making me antsy.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"The Lake City arena." Brogan waves an arm toward the big building with a straight face. "It's right there, little sister."

"You know what I mean."

He breaks into a soft chuckle. "You wanna tell her, Arch?" he asks, looking to the man at my side.

He nods, and when I give him my full attention, he stalls. I'm close to stomping my foot.

"It's cute how frustrated you are but the only thing I can see is how fucking hot you look in that miniskirt." He glances over my shoulder. "Thank you, London."

"Any time."

"I'm right fucking here," Brogan says too quietly for Archer to hear him.

Because most of my clothes were dirty, London handed me a black leather miniskirt and a white tank top from her closet. I paired it with boots

since I wasn't sure if heels would be appropriate for wherever we were going. Looking around at the other people, I think I made the right call. I don't see a pair of heels anywhere.

If you don't tell me right now, you won't touch what's under this miniskirt for a week, I sign.

His head falls back and he laughs loudly toward the sky.

"What'd she say?" Brogan asks.

Archer ignores him and signs back, *You don't mean that.*

Fuck around and find out, Holland.

Humor still dances across his face, but I can tell my threat is about to get me what I want. Also, there's no way I could hold out for an entire week.

"It's a concert."

For whatever reason that option hadn't occurred to me.

"Who's playing?"

"Five different bands."

"Five different hard rock bands," London clarifies. "No one you've heard of."

"She's heard them. She just doesn't know it," Archer says. He looks to me. "Disappointed?"

"Are you kidding? I haven't been to a concert in forever."

"Let's go. First band should be starting any second." Brogan tips his head toward the entrance.

Archer takes my hand and threads our fingers together. A giddy sensation works through me.

"I could never hold out a week," I tell him in case he didn't realize I was joking earlier.

He leans in. The tip of his nose grazes the shell of my ear as he whispers, "I know."

By the time we grab drinks and find our seats on the floor, the first band has started. A huge smile spreads across my face at the loud, angry music. I turn to Archer realizing in here he's definitely not going to be able to hear me.

It's almost like being in your room, I sign to him.

His stare roams down over my body, coming up slowly to land on my mouth. *In that case, you're wearing too many clothes.*

I stand in front of him, leaning into him ever so slightly, so my back rests against his chest. I can't understand half the lyrics, but the beat is good and it

reminds me so much of all those early nights with Archer's music vibrating through my wall.

He moves with the music, occasionally singing along. The first band finishes and another one starts up. Archer likes this one more, judging by the number of songs he knows the lyrics to. He has a nice voice, and the deep rumble vibrations has me turned on and pushing my ass into his crotch. His fingers brush against the hem of my skirt, teasing me but doing nothing to quench the ache building in my core.

London and Brogan stand next to us in a similar stance. Except Brogan has his arms wrapped around her chest, leaning his head against hers. They're cute. I'm really happy he's found someone that's so good for him.

London catches my eye and smiles. She pulls away from Brogan who gives her a quizzical look. She takes my hand and pulls me with her.

"Where are you going?" Brogan shouts.

"We'll be right back."

She doesn't drop my hand until we get out to the concession area. "You looked like you could use a break from the music."

"No, it's great."

She eyes me skeptically.

"Okay, it's loud and they're basically just screaming, right?"

Her laughter echoes down the empty hallway. She walks toward a beer vendor, holding up two fingers to the girl working.

"I find alcohol helps." She hands me one of the beers and keeps the other for herself.

We walk slowly away, sipping from the bottles.

"How many concerts have you been to with Brogan?"

"Only one other. The three of us went to an 80s rock cover band concert this summer." Her mouth pulls into a grin. "I bet Archer is extra grateful you're with us this time."

"Why?"

"Brogan and I snuck off to have sex in the truck between bands."

I try to keep from bursting out with laughter and fail. "No, you didn't."

"We did." She shrugs her shoulders up toward her ears. "I have no regrets, but poor Archer. He's had to third wheel it with us a lot."

"I don't think he minds. He adores you."

"Same. He's the best." London pauses a few feet away from the tunnel that leads back to the seats. "You think so too, right?"

“That Archer is the best?”

She nods, staring at me in a frightening sort of way. London’s always been so sweet and nice but right now I get the feeling she’s ready to throw down if I say the wrong thing.

“If I say no are you going to kick my ass?”

Her expression softens and she laughs. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

I laugh along with her, but then she stops suddenly and she’s glaring at me again.

“If you and my brother have kids, you’re going to be great at scaring your kids into telling the truth,” I tell her honestly.

“Don’t sidestep the question. Are you in love with him or what?”

Surprise makes me choke on the next sip of my beer. “Love?”

“I see the way you look at him and him at you.”

“He’s really great and we’re having so much fun.”

She keeps giving me that tough stare. “And?”

“I’m a little in love with him,” I admit finally. Damn she’s good.

London squeals and lunges to hug me, spilling a little of her beer on me in the process. “I knew it. I so knew it.”

“He doesn’t know so you cannot say anything,” I say, suddenly panicking a little. I’ve barely even admitted it to myself.

“I won’t.” She mimes zipping her lips and then breaks out into another huge smile. I can’t believe this same woman was just glaring at me a few seconds ago.

Now that I’ve said the words out loud, my stomach is a bundle of nerves walking back into the concert. Archer and Brogan are standing together, belting out the song with huge smiles on their faces.

London shoots me a knowing grin. Brogan spots us first, opening up his stance and singing directly to her. My gaze moves to Archer. He’s looking my way, no longer singing.

Everything okay? he signs.

Perfect.

I walk right up to him, sling my arms over his shoulders and kiss him. His surprise only has him hesitating for a second before he’s wrapping me up closer and sweeping his tongue into my mouth.

He said kissing was mandatory at this event. I agree. Kissing Archer is my favorite sport. It’s never just a kiss with him. It’s so much more.

My heart hammers in my chest. I want him in a way I’ve never wanted

anyone else. It's beyond a physical need.

I'm not sure how long we kiss, but when the song comes to an end and the noise falls to a dull roar, I pull back. He stares back at me with adoration, almost lazily roaming over my features like he's trying to memorize the way I look. My insides go soft.

Another song starts up.

"Is this one of your favorites?" I ask.

He shakes his head, attention tuned to my mouth now in that way he does when he's reading my lips. It never stops surprising me how good Archer is at making me feel heard. Some people would probably attribute it to his hearing loss and him wanting to keep up with conversations, but I think it's just him. He cares deeply for the people in his life and he makes sure they know it.

Being one of those people he's let into his circle is special. Which is exactly how he makes me feel. I can only hope I make him feel a fraction of that feeling in return.

"Want to go on a little adventure?" I ask him.

His brows pinch together. "An adventure?"

Nodding, I grab his hand and pull him with me. I stop in front of London and Brogan.

"Can I borrow your truck key, big brother?" I hold my palm out and fight a smile.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls it out before something snaps into place for him. Brogan pulls the key back out of reach from me.

"Wait. Why do you need my truck?" he asks.

"Don't worry. We aren't going anywhere. I just want to sit in it for a few minutes."

My intent hits London and she covers a laugh with one hand. Brogan looks between his fiancée and me. Then he looks to Archer.

"You're not..." He trails off.

My smile finally breaks free. "At least you have someone to hang with while we're gone."

"I don't need to hear the specifics." He groans and hands over his keys.

"Thank you," I yell over the music and pull Archer with me.

When we get outside, he tips his head toward the keys in my fingers and asks, "What was that about?"

"London mentioned they once left you at a concert to go have sex in the

truck.” I aim a flirty smile at him. “I thought you might want to get a little payback.”

“Oh shit.” Laughter spills out of him. He tugs me to him and swipes his mouth over mine. “I think that’s the nicest thing anyone’s done for me.”

“I’ve got your back, baby.”

He pulls the tailgate of the truck down and takes a seat. “There’s just one problem.”

“What’s that?”

“There are cameras.” He points, and I swivel around and find the little device, actually several of them.

“Well shit.” I look back to him. “How’d they do it?”

He’s grinning despite the situation. “We were at a different venue. Less security.”

Laughing, I take a seat next to him. “So I pulled you out here for nothing?”

“Nah. I’m glad to have you all to myself, even if it means keeping my hands off of you.”

“I was looking forward to your hands being on me.”

“Me too.” He places his palm across my thigh, fingers splayed out, so they curl around the sides. He tips his head back to the sky and his eyes flutter closed for a moment.

He’s such a beautiful man. Masculine and rough, but beautiful. I rest my head against his shoulder, and he wraps his arm around my waist.

It isn’t what I had in mind, but sitting under the stars and just being with him is still better than almost anything else I can imagine doing right now.

I can just hear the music inside, the guitar and heavy drums. Turning to face Archer, I place my legs over the top of his. The tips of his fingers move under my skirt. Not as high as we both wish they were, but enough to make my stomach flutter with excitement for later.

“I think I could sit with you anywhere, any time and feel like the luckiest guy in the world.”

“Yeah, me too.” Though I had definitely imagined us out here doing something.

“I have something for you.” He shifts so he can reach into his pocket.

“You do?” I ask, even as he pulls out a small gold bracelet.

“It’s not wrapped or anything, but I saw it today and thought of you.”

He drops the jewelry in my hand. I run a fingernail over the thin chain

and the small ballet shoe charm.

“You replaced my bracelet.” And it looks way more expensive than the original. I think it’s the first time a man has given me a gift outside of holidays or my birthday, and I’m at a loss for words.

“It’s beautiful.”

He smiles in a relieved kind of way that makes me wonder if he was nervous about giving it to me.

I drape it along my right wrist and clasp it, then hold up my arm to let the charm dangle.

“Thank you.”

SABRINA

“Are you ready?” Archer asks, holding the football up in one hand.

“Definitely not.”

His lips quirk into a grin that I can see from ten yards away. “I’m going to throw it right to you. You just have to catch it.”

“And not let it hit me in the face,” I mutter to myself.

“Here it comes,” Archer says.

Not at all feeling confident, I hold my hands up anyway. When the football sails my way, I send up a silent prayer that I can manage to keep it from breaking my nose. I squeeze my eyes shut as it approaches—probably not the best plan, but when it hits my palms, I instinctively curl my fingers around it.

Peeking out of one eye, I’m shocked to find myself holding the ball. I did it!

Archer’s smile has doubled in size. A giddy sensation zips through me.

“Now what?” I yell.

“Run it into the end zone.”

I take off, jogging more than running, until I hear Archer’s footsteps behind me. I glance over my shoulder. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to tackle you.”

My heart rate picks up and a thrill rushes through me with him chasing me. I increase my speed. “I thought you were playing quarterback?”

“I’m multi-talented.”

I get one foot in the end zone before he wraps his arms around me. Slowly and much more gentle than any defender in the league, Archer pulls me to the ground on top of him.

“Did I score?”

His eyes twinkle with amusement. “You sure did.”

“Should I get up and show you my victory dance?”

“Later.” His mouth covers mine. I let the ball go to tangle my fingers in his thick hair.

In the background I can hear some of his other teammates on the field. They had the day off practice, but Archer had to come by for a quick meeting and asked me to come along.

I didn’t ask enough questions because apparently that meeting was teaching me how to play football.

When I pull back and roll over to the side, he smiles at me, brushing my hair away from my face.

“Am I as good as my brother?” I ask him.

“Definitely. And you look better on the field.”

Laughing, I kiss him again. The rush of scoring a touchdown has me jumping back up to my feet. “Can we do it again?”

Amusement plays over his face, but he gets up looking as eager as I feel.

He throws the ball to me a few more times. I show him my victory dance, a ballet jump where I do the splits in the air, that Archer says is both impressive and sexy as fuck. Then I mimic Brogan’s cocky dance and Archer’s more humble, quiet, one arm fist pump of victory.

“I don’t think I look like that,” he says.

“Oh no, you look way sexier when you do it,” I assure him. He does, in fact, look *very* good when he does it.

“Been awhile since I got to do a victory dance.” He tosses the ball and catches it in one hand. “Next time I get there I might be so glad that I do one of your little leaps to celebrate.”

“Promise?”

He huffs a laugh in response. His expression is clouded suddenly, and I scrunch up my face as I replay our conversation for what has him looking far less happy than he did just a few seconds ago.

“Are you worried about the game this weekend?”

“No, not really,” he says, but not all that convincingly.

I wait him out to see if he’ll add more. His jaw works back and forth

before he finally does. “If I don’t step up and start contributing, I don’t think I’ll be a Maverick for much longer.”

“They could trade you?” My heart lurches at the thought. I hadn’t even considered that. Yes, I know players get traded all the time, but not Archer.

“I don’t have a no-trade clause, so yeah.”

“But you’re a great player. Brogan must have told me how talented you are a dozen times. And I saw an article that mentioned you as one of the top receivers to watch.”

He gives me a wobbly smile. “Reading up on me?”

“I seem to be drawn to mentions of you lately.”

“So that’s a yes?”

“Yes, I’ve been reading up on you.” I roll my eyes playfully. “So I know what I’m talking about.”

“I appreciate it, but talent isn’t enough. The team needs someone who can get in the end zone.”

“You can. I know it.” I grab his shirt with both hands and shake him lightly. “You need to believe it.”

His gaze roams over my face, smiling ever so slightly.

“My boyfriend can’t get traded. I need you here.” I lean in and kiss him.

He hums against my lips. “In that case, I better get my shit together.”

I rest my arms over his shoulders. “I meant it. I believe in you. You’ll figure out how to get back in the end zone. And when you do, I’ll be in the stands cheering louder than anyone else.”

He presses his mouth to mine and lingers there almost as if he’s breathing me in instead of kissing me.

“I don’t know what I did to deserve you.” He rests his forehead against mine. “But I’m not letting you go now that I’ve got you.”

As if I’d try to go anywhere.



After we leave the stadium, Archer drives me to the studio. I peer in through the front windows, heart squeezing with pride and excitement at the transformed space.

There’s a note on the front door from Eleanor. I peel it off, reading her beautiful cursive penmanship.

Studio looks lovely.

Came by to chat. Give me a ring when you have a chance.

Eleanor

“Aww, I’m sad I missed her,” I say as I unlock the front door. The space is stuffy, and I prop the door open to let in some fresh air.

Archer walks over to the front desk and picks up one of the flyers for the studio.

“These are great,” he says, smiling.

“I know. London is amazing. As soon as those went up around town, I started getting emails and calls. The Saturday toddler class is completely full already.”

“That’s incredible.” His smile widens and the pride that beams off him is intoxicating.

“It is.” I let myself feel all the things—excitement, happiness, a little fear that I’m in over my head and going to screw it all up. I don’t really believe that last thing, but it lingers there, reminding me how much I want this to work.

“I’m going to get coffee and then you can put me to work however you need,” Archer says.

There isn’t much left to do, just a few final touches before we open next weekend. It’ll be a quiet opening since it’s just me working for now, but hopefully in a month or two I can afford to hire some other instructors and a part-time office manager.

“Okay,” I say. “I’m going to call Eleanor.”

It’s been a few weeks since we’ve chatted. Maybe I can convince her to come back later. I really want to show her every detail. Her approval means so much.

I pull out my cell and call her. Something tells me Eleanor isn’t big on texting.

She answers on the third ring in her bright, clear voice, “Hello?”

“Hey. It’s Sabrina.”

“Oh, Sabrina darling. It’s so good to hear from you.”

I smile, picturing her on the other end. “Yeah, you too. I’m sorry I wasn’t at the studio when you stopped by.”

“From the looks of it, you earned a break. I hardly recognize the place.”

I wander around on the dance floor. If I close my eyes, I can almost hear

the footsteps of children in ballet shoes. "You have to come back so I can give you a proper tour of the space."

"I would love that, but it will have to be soon."

My brows pinch together. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes, yes, great actually. I'm about to be a grandma."

"Congratulations."

"It's about time. I was about to give up hope, but Will called earlier this week and said his wife is expecting twins."

"Oh my gosh. Twins!"

"Can you believe it?"

"I can't," I say, shaking my head.

"They're going to need help, so I'm moving to Sarasota."

"That's so nice of you."

"It's mostly selfish. I miss being around kids. They keep you young. You'll find that out yourself when that studio is filled with little ones."

I got caught up in the good news and forgot that it started with her implying she'd be leaving soon. "When are you leaving?"

"Next month."

"So soon?"

"I want to find my own place and get settled before the babies come. Plus, it's been a while since I've had a white Christmas."

"I don't know what to say. I'm happy for you, but I'm sad you won't be around to see your building filled with kids again."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. There's no easy way to say this." She's quiet, as if considering her words. "I've decided to sell the building."

My stomach drops.

At my silence, she continues, "It's just not feasible for me to be across the country and keep an eye on things."

"Couldn't you hire someone to manage the building for you? You said yourself that it was a great investment. I know you took a hit on the lease payments for me, but I can pay more once I have some steady payments coming in."

"No, sweet child, I don't want your money. I'm thrilled with how you've transformed the building. You have made an old woman very happy. I can leave this city knowing I handed the reins over to the best possible person. You have already made my wildest dreams come true seeing that old place

ready for new life. I promise I will make sure the new owner guarantees the same rental agreements we have in place. I'm meeting with my lawyer tomorrow."

I find myself nodding, unable to say much in response. Eleanor reassures me that it's all going to be fine, but my stomach is in knots by the time I hang up.

That's how Archer finds me. I'm not sure how long I've been standing in one place, staring into space.

"What's wrong?"

I snap out of my trance, blinking several times. Archer sets the coffees on the front counter and comes over to me.

I'm still holding my phone in one hand. I lift it slightly. "Eleanor is moving and she's selling the building."

"Aww, I'm sorry." His lips pull into a flat smile.

"I don't know what I'm going to do."

"Your lease is good for at least a year, right?"

"Yeah, and she promised to get all the legal documents transferred over to ensure the new owner can't make big, sweeping changes, but it just feels... wrong."

"We'll figure it out." He hugs me, cupping the back of my head to his chest.

My throat is too tight to speak.

After a few long moments where I soak up his presence, he pulls back. "Come on. Let's go home."

I let him pull me toward the door, but when he comes up short, I glance up confused.

"What—?" I start to ask, but the question is answered by the man in the door.

Walker Graham.

ARCHER

I'm vibrating with anger as soon as I see him. I know.

I just fucking know.

"You." It isn't a question but an accusation.

His eyes widen, like maybe he wasn't expecting to find me here, but then that annoying smirk of his appears on his face.

Smug. Arrogant.

It can't be a coincidence that he's here. He bought Sabrina's building. And he did it because of me. Because of whatever sick fascination he has with fucking with my life. That's fine. I can handle it, but I won't sit by while he fucks her over.

"What the fuck did you do?" I'm up in his face, so close I can smell the stench of his cheap ass cologne. It's so strong it steals my breath.

Surprise makes his brows shoot up and fear crosses his features before he can mask it, followed by a knowing grin as he relaxes back into the cocky asshole I know.

"Well, hello to you too," he says, like small talk is something we've ever done. We aren't friends. I'd barely even call him a teammate. He's a selfish prick who only thinks about himself.

From the moment he was traded to the team he's made my life hell. Little things that have stolen some of the joy of football and playing for the Mavericks. I don't think I even realized it until now how much he's taken from me.

I'm not about to let him take from Sabrina too. She doesn't deserve that. If I'd known he was going to poison everything and everyone around me, I would have stayed far away from Sabrina. Or punched him a lot sooner.

Fuck, I can't believe this. Eleanor is going to let this asshole buy the building?

I want to beat him and send his body parts back to Vegas where he came from.

"I see you've already heard the good news," Graham says, stepping past me into the studio. He raises his arms out to the side. Smug and gloating. "I'm your new landlord."

Yep, definitely should have punched him sooner.

I follow him, putting myself between him and Sabrina. I don't even want him to look at her. He's not worthy of breathing the same air as her.

Sabrina asks him a question, but her voice quivers so I only catch parts of it. She wants to know if it's true. If he really bought this place.

All the work she put into making this studio something special. A mash-up of dreams. Eleanor's, her mom's, hers. To have it pulled out from underneath her now is cruel. Sure, she has the lease agreement, but there are a million ways he can make things uncomfortable for her, and I guarantee he's going to use every single one.

"It's not a done deal, but I always get what I want." His smile is big and predatory.

I'm seething with no outlet for it. I wouldn't want to get blood on the new floors.

"We'll see about that," I say. There has to be something we can do. Eleanor loves Sabrina, loves this building.

Graham's expression, still smug, turns serious. "Eleanor wants to sell fast, and she knows I'm good for it."

He looks to Sabrina. "I have to thank you. The work you did on this place is really going to help the market value. Shame you didn't demand a longer rental agreement."

"You're an asshole," I grit out between clenched teeth.

He makes a tsk noise twice, shaking his finger at me. "Is that any way to treat the guy who controls..." He looks around. "Everything."

My hands curl into fists. The only reason I haven't already decked him (I'll buy her new floors if I ruin these) is because if he is her new landlord, I don't want to cause any more problems for her. He would have already lost

interest in the building if it weren't for me.

"Don't worry, Holland." He moves around, looking at the studio, taking in details in a way that feels invasive and mocking. He runs a finger along a pair of worn ballet shoes hanging on the wall. "I want this place to succeed as much as you do. I'm good at the things I do...unlike you."

He stops circling the studio and steps closer to me. "Besides, one of you needs a job and I'm about to put you out of yours. It's only fair I let your girl keep hers. At least for a while. Eventually this building will make a great parking garage."

He makes a move like he's going to lay a hand on my shoulder. I sidestep him. "Don't fucking touch me."

I'm wound so tight I don't trust myself. One more asshole remark and I'm not going to be able to hold back.

"You want to hit me right now, don't you?" he asks, grinning like that's exactly what he came here for.

It's only because that's what he wants that I don't. It probably wouldn't get me kicked off the team, but it wouldn't help things. And he knows it. Knows I'm barely hanging on to a job that I love.

Sabrina steps in front of me. Even in this moment she's careful to angle herself so I can read her lips. God, I love her for that tiny gesture. I love her for a million reasons.

Her face is like marble, beautiful but cold. "Get out of my studio."

"Mine soon enough, darling." Graham winks.

Her lips tremble, but she holds her head high. "Until then, you're not welcome here."

Graham has the gall to laugh. "I look forward to working together."

When he's gone, my anger only rises. This is all my fault. He doesn't give a shit about this building. He wants to piss me off and he'll use any avenue possible.

Sabrina turns to me and buries her face in my chest. Her shoulders shake in a way I know she's crying, even though I can't hear it.

It breaks me that she's upset, and I can't do anything about it. Not a single thing.

"We'll figure this out." I wrap my arms around her, holding her tightly against me. "I promise."

ARCHER

“Can I get you anything?” I ask Sabrina as I stand in the doorway of her bedroom.

She’s propped up on the bed with pillows behind her back. Her mouth curves into a soft smile as she looks at me.

“No, I’ll be okay.” Her eyes flutter closed, and I can see her chest rise and fall as she focuses on her breathing.

The run-in with Graham has her asthma flaring up. One more reason to fucking hate that guy.

“Rest,” I tell her. “I’ll order food, and we can chill tonight.”

Her eyes open and she shakes her head. She sits up. “I’m babysitting Greer tonight. Olivia has an event at the bookstore she can’t miss.” The stubbornness in her tone tells me that she’s not going to abandon her friend when she needs her.

But she’s in no shape to watch Greer.

“Can’t someone else help?”

“Olivia is really picky about who she lets watch her.”

I nod, remembering how protective Knox was over us when we were little. I can’t remember a single time someone other than my mom or my brothers looked out for me or Flynn.

“What if I watch her?” I ask.

I’m not sure Olivia trusts me, but I think I can manage dressing up like a princess and reading a dozen or so books. My throat tightens at the thought.

“You’re sweet, but I can manage.”

Stubborn, beautiful woman.

I move to the side of her bed and sit beside her. “Okay, but how about you have Olivia drop her here and that way I can help out *if* you need it.”

“I know what you’re doing.” Her lips twist into a playful, knowing smile.

“What’s that?” I ask, leaning in and placing a soft kiss on her mouth.

“You’re sweet and too good to me. I’m okay. I promise. I know my limits and I can hang with Greer for a few hours.”

I drop my head so it’s resting in her lap. I want to be near her but don’t want to make breathing harder. Her fingers come up to thread through my hair. It feels nice and I try to soak it in, let it soothe me.

“I don’t feel sweet or good right now,” I admit. More like murderous and restless.

I sit up and meet her eyes. We were quiet on the drive home. I was spiraling and she was focusing on breathing. I don’t have to hear her say it to know she’s worried about what will happen with the studio.

Her hands fall to cover mine. She squeezes gently. “Stop it. You didn’t do anything.”

“You know that’s not true. If we weren’t together, then he wouldn’t be so hell-bent on owning that building.”

“You can’t know that.”

I do though. In my gut, I know he’s doing this because of me.



When Brogan and London get home, the four of us sit in the living room while Sabrina tells them about Eleanor moving to Florida and selling the building.

My frustrations are a constant companion, but I keep it in check as best I can. Sabrina has enough on her mind without worrying about me. And that’s just who she is, someone who thinks of other people even when she’s at a low point.

Brogan crosses both arms over his chest. “Can’t you talk to Eleanor and tell her what an asshole Graham is?”

“She wants to move closer to family. I can’t ask her to wait because I don’t like the buyer.”

“Fine. Then I’ll buy the building,” Brogan says.

“What?” London and Sabrina say at the same time with matching expressions: eyes wide, brows raised.

Damn. I hadn’t even thought of that, but he’s right. Eleanor just needs another buyer. Surely there are lots of those?

“How much could a building cost?” he asks, then pulls out his phone probably to google the answer.

“Fuck me,” he mutters quietly. Obviously, the answer was more than whatever he thought. He recovers quickly. “I have enough for a down payment, and I’ll take a loan out for the rest.”

“We could pool our money,” I say. I don’t know what half is, but it doesn’t matter. I can’t think of a single thing I’d rather do with my savings.

“No,” Sabrina says. A small smile tugs at the corners of her mouth. “Thank you both, but no.”

“This is what family does,” Brogan tells her. “What good is having money if I can’t use it to help out when it’s needed?”

“He’s right.” As I speak, she meets my gaze. “Let us do this for you. You deserve it. That studio is going to be the best in the city and the neighborhood is great. It’s a good investment.”

Fuck, I hate that I almost sound like Graham right now with his good investment bullshit. But I know that whatever she touches is going to succeed. I’d gamble on her all day long.

“I can’t tell you how much it means to me that you’d offer, but it’s just a building. I can find another.”

“You put so much work into this one.” London says the thing we’re all thinking.

Hours. Weeks. She poured her heart and soul into that place.

“And I’d do it again. Making that space mine was an incredible experience.” Her smile is genuine, and I know she’s ready to lie down and accept this cruel change of fate, but I’m not. Not yet.

“Fucking Graham,” I grumble. “He’s doing this because of me.”

“Maybe.” She shrugs one shoulder like she’s already considered that and doesn’t care.

“We could pretend to break up and see if he loses interest.”

A soft laugh, barely discernable, slips from her lips. “That’s the sweetest way anyone has tried to break up with me.”

Brogan is burning a hole through me. I feel his stare and when I glance at

him, he signs, *What the fuck?*

“*Pretend break up,*” I clarify for both of them. I’m not losing her. Fuck Graham.

“No.” She gives her head one definitive shake. “No way.”

Her phone screen lights up and she glances down at it. “Olivia and Greer are on their way up.”

She stands, but I’m faster.

“You relax. I got this,” I say as I head for the front door.

“So bossy.” She grins at me but stays seated.

Greer is as cute and as full of energy as I remembered. She bounds into the apartment in her pink dress with a tiara on top of her head but then comes to an abrupt stop when she spots Brogan. Ever so carefully, she moves behind me.

I squat down so I’m at her level. “Scary looking, isn’t he?”

She doesn’t respond, but her face is filled with trepidation.

Brogan smiles and waves one hand. He’s a big guy and with his shirt off, probably even more intimidating to Greer.

Put a shirt on for fuck’s sake, I sign to him. Then to Greer I say, “That’s Brogan. He’s nice. I promise. And that’s London.”

“Hi, Greer.” London smiles brightly. “I’ve heard so much about you from Sabrina.”

“Nice to meet you,” Brogan says to her. “I like your dress.”

“What do you say?” Olivia asks her daughter, coming to stand beside her.

“Thank you.” Greer’s voice is barely more than a whisper.

“Hey.” Brogan lifts a hand. “Good to see you again.”

“Yeah, you too. Thanks for letting Greer hang tonight.” As Olivia talks, Greer nuzzles back so she’s plastered against her mom’s legs, still keeping a close eye on Brogan.

Sabrina comes over to greet Olivia and Greer despite my efforts to keep her seated and exerting as little energy as possible.

“Are you kidding, we’re so excited.” Sabrina hugs Greer first then Olivia. To the latter, she adds, “I’m so sorry about this.”

“No, this is great. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate it. How are you feeling?” Olivia asks her.

“Better.”

I make a small huff. She’s still hurting. I can tell by the way she doesn’t stand straight and talks quieter.

Sabrina rolls her eyes at me but smiles. “Don’t worry. He won’t let me do too much.”

Damn straight I won’t.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Take your time. We got it,” I say.

Olivia eyes me with amused skepticism. Greer still looks slightly terrified. So basically, I’m killing it on babysitting duty.

Leaning down so her face is eye-level with Greer, Sabrina says quietly, “Do you remember how I have a big brother who plays football?”

Greer’s little head nods rapidly.

“Brogan is that brother.”

Her eyes widen. “You weren’t kidding. He is big.”

We all laugh. Brogan blushes for what might be the first time ever.

“He is,” Sabrina agrees. “But he’s really nice, I promise.”

“And he really likes playing dress up,” I tell her. Which is true. Just not usually in dresses and tiaras. “I bet we could talk him into a princess fashion show later.”

She thinks seriously about this. “I don’t think my dress will fit him.”

I bite back a laugh and can feel Brogan glaring at me. “Don’t you worry. We’ll figure something out.”

London and Sabrina are both fighting laughter too.

Glancing at Olivia, I say a little quieter, “We’ll be fine.”

Her early reservations seem somewhat abated.

“Text me if you need anything,” she says, then picks up her daughter to hug her again. “Be good for Aunt Sabrina.”

“I will.”

With a reluctant smile, Olivia places Greer back on her feet and heads for the door.

“Bye, Liv!” Sabrina calls after her.

As soon as she’s gone, we all fall quiet. There’s a child in my apartment and I have no idea what to do next.

Thankfully, Sabrina does. She takes Greer by the hand and walks with her into the kitchen. Brogan manages to find a shirt and then he and London make pizza, which Greer finds fascinating and eventually decides it’s worth it to get close to Brogan to help out.

By the time it’s done, Greer is as enamored with him as every other woman he meets. I glance over at Sabrina. She’s smiling happily watching

the two of them interact, but she still doesn't look like she's one hundred percent.

While Brogan holds Greer up on his shoulders so she can help him and London clean up from dinner, I turn on the barstool to face Sabrina.

"How are you holding up?"

"I'm tired, but my chest isn't as tight."

"Why don't you go to bed or at least lie down on the couch."

She smiles but in a way that I can tell she's about to argue.

"I've got this, baby."

"Oh, *you* do, huh?" She glances over at Brogan.

"He's like a big kid himself so it makes sense that she'd be drawn to him. But I'll keep an eye on him to make sure she doesn't eat her weight in ice cream or stay up all night long."

"Okay."

I'm shocked that she agrees. My face must show it because she adds, "Just for a little while."

I lean forward and brush my lips over hers. "Take as much time as you need."

She slides off the chair. "I'm going to sleep in your bed so Greer can have mine."

"Practical and lucky for me."



The rest of the evening is a blur of princess movies, dress up, and a fashion show (I never need to see Brogan in a sheet dress ever again). Greer is so tired by bedtime that I only get through half of a book before she's out.

I leave on a lamp and crack the door in case she wakes up, then look in on Sabrina. I'm pretty sure she's out for the night too. Today really took it out of her. The reminder of what led to her flare-up has me grinding my back teeth all over again.

In the living room, I find Brogan alone. I let out a long breath as I take a seat next to him.

"Cute kid," he says.

"Yeah," I agree.

"How's Sabrina?"

“Still sleeping,” I say. “Did London go to bed too?”

“Yeah. She isn’t feeling great either. I think she’s coming down with a head cold.” His beer rests in one hand, propped up on his leg. “So, what are we going to do about Graham?”

“What can we do?” I ask as I run a hand through my hair. It’s messier than normal from all the times I’ve tugged at the strands thinking about him being Sabrina’s landlord.

“If I knew, I’d already have done it. I’d love to kick his ass for the shit he’s pulled on you this season alone.”

“I can’t help but think this wouldn’t be happening if he didn’t already have it out for me. He’s picking a fight with me through her.”

“He’s a prick. There’s no telling what he would or wouldn’t have done. He’s threatened by you and what that means for his position on the team. That’s why he doesn’t mess with anyone else.”

“Maybe,” I say, wondering if it’s that simple.

“Don’t beat yourself up about it. That’s what he wants. And anyway, it doesn’t matter. We’re here now.”

“I suppose you’re right.” I let my head fall back onto the cushion.

“Cheer up. We’ll figure this out together. I already have a few ideas.”

“You do?” I ask, anxious to hear them because I have none outside of beating him so badly that he can’t sign the contract with Eleanor.

Brogan sits forward and glances toward the front door.

“That must be Olivia,” he says.

“I got it.” I stand to answer it.

“All right. I’m heading to bed. We’ll talk Graham’s demise in the morning.” His mouth pulls up in a half smile, like he’s going to enjoy taking him down as much as me.

With a nod I move toward the door, and he goes off to his room. I pull open the door without bothering to look through the peephole, but I guess I should have because it’s not Olivia.

“Flynn,” I say, taking in my baby brother standing slumped with either hand propped up on the sides of the doorframe like it’s the only thing holding him up. “What are you doing here?”

“Good to see you too.” He stumbles forward, brushing past me and smelling like he fell into a liquor cabinet.

“Are you drunk?” I’m slow to follow him as my brain processes him being here at all, let alone wasted.

He plops down on the couch, sitting like his head weighs fifty pounds. Even still, he lifts it enough to speak where I can read his lips. *"Don't act like you weren't doing the same thing when you were my age. I lived with you, remember?"*

He tries to sign as well, but his movements are all over the place.

"I remember." I take a seat on the other end of the couch. "What are you doing here?"

"The Twins cut me loose. I didn't know where else to go."

Shit. My gut twists into a knot. With everything happening lately, I've been too caught up in my own shit to think about what might happen after his bad game that ended the Twins' season.

"Is Knox traveling this week?" It doesn't make sense that he'd stop here instead of going to Valley. He and Knox are closer and that's home.

"I don't want to stay with him right now." He keeps signing as he lies back with his head resting on one arm of the couch. *"He'll want to talk about it and I'm not ready."*

"Okay." I guess that means we aren't going to talk about it either. I can respect that. "Brogan just went to bed. Do you want me to wake him?"

"Nah. I'll catch up with him in the morning. It's cool if I stay a day or two, right?" he asks.

"Yeah, of course. You'll have to stay on the couch tonight though. There's a five-year-old in the spare bedroom."

His brows lift. *"Does Brogan have a secret kid in addition to the secret sister?"*

"No. I'm babysitting," I clarify.

"You?" He manages a laugh. The transformation on his face has him looking more like my little brother. *"Who would let you babysit their child?"*

"She's a friend of Sabrina's and I'm a great babysitter, thank you very much."

"You hated watching me when I was younger."

"That was different. I was a kid myself."

"Remember that time you and Brogan were watching me, and I put pizza rolls in the microwave for like ten minutes?" He huffs a laugh. *"Nearly burned the house down. Knox was so pissed."*

"Do you want to stay or not?"

"Yes, thank you. The couch is great." He stretches his long legs out and closes his eyes.

“I’ll get you a blanket and pillow.” I stand and start for my room, then stop and glance back. “I’m sorry about the Twins.”

His eyes slowly open and a flash of pain crosses his face. “*Thanks.*”

Don’t touch the microwave. And get your shoes off my couch. What, were you raised by wolves? I sign the question with a smile.

Worse. By four obnoxious big brothers.

SABRINA

“Hey, you’re up.” Archer wakes up next to me. A sleepy smile pulls at the corners of his mouth. “How are you feeling?”

“Much better,” I say. Emotionally and physically. Yesterday I was wrecked by the news of the studio, but this morning I woke up with a sense of acceptance. Yes, I’m sad but I proved so much to myself in the past few months. The building isn’t the magic. I am.

His hand comes up to my shoulder and skates down to my elbow and back up slowly. “Good.”

“Did everything go okay with Greer last night?”

“Yeah. We had a blast. She dressed up Brogan and they had a fashion show. It was something.”

“I’m sorry I missed that.”

“Don’t be. I’ll never be able to unsee it.”

“I should check in with Olivia on how everything went last night.”

“It was after midnight when she picked up Greer so they’re probably sleeping in.”

“Little kids don’t sleep in.” I turn over and grab my phone to check if Olivia texted. She did, only once late last night to thank us and say they made it home.

Archer’s arms wrap around my middle and he nuzzles into the crook of my neck. I wriggle my ass back against his crotch.

He lets out a low groan and bites the side of my throat lightly, then sucks.

Heat spreads through me as I sink into his hold.

I set my phone back on the nightstand and turn around in his arms.

Archer's hazel eyes search my face. "I love you."

My heart lurches in my chest at his unexpected words. "You do?"

His answer is a slow nod as he brings his fingers up to the side of my cheek and drags his knuckles down over my skin and then rests one hand along the side of my neck. "Yeah. Does that freak you out?"

"No. I love you too." I press into him, smiling against his mouth as I kiss him.

"Oh, thank god." He lets out a rush of air but can't hide his grin. "I was worried."

"No, you weren't." I swat at him playfully.

"I was a little." His voice is a little more serious. He guides his hand down so his palm is splayed out over my chest. "Say it again."

"I love you."

His lips pull up higher at the corners as he watches my mouth and feels my words.

I sit up. "*I love you, Archer.*"

I love you too, he signs back, then with his left hand he makes half a heart and holds it up in the air.

I do the same with my right hand, putting it up next to his to form a perfect heart.

Giddy, I move so I'm straddling him. His hands move under my tank top, and I let mine roam over his chest and stomach. I'll never get tired of tracing the muscle and memorizing every inch of him. He's perfect.

"You're perfect," he says as he cups my breasts.

A laugh shakes free from my chest. "I was just thinking the same thing about you."

I pull my shirt off for him and toss it onto the floor beside the bed, then push myself down so I'm face-level with the bulge in his sweatpants.

He lifts his hips as I hook my fingers under the band and tug. When his cock springs free, I lean down until my lips are millimeters from the head, look up at him and sign, *Perfect*.

I don't give him a chance to reply before I take him into my mouth.

He groans, pushing my hair back with one hand and wrapping the strands around his fingers. The slight tug makes my scalp prick and desire pool low in my stomach.

I wish I could explain to him how much he's changed me and my life for the better. I came back to Lake City still wounded from all that my mom had been through. I was filled with determination, but it was tinged with fear. Fear about my mom's health and that I wouldn't be able to accomplish the very thing she sent me here to do.

Archer was there for me, helping with the studio without my ever asking. Taking some of that burden left room for me to dream and decide what it was I truly wanted for myself. Not just with the studio but how I want to show up in the world.

And somewhere along the way, he worked his way up the list. I want him. Now and as part of my future.

As I lick and suck, bobbing up and down over his length, he groans and tightens his grip in my hair, ever so gently pushing me to take him deeper.

I do, but then he's quick to use that same tight grip to pull me off him.

"I need to be inside you." He rises up and flips me onto my back. The speed at which he gets my panties off is truly impressive.

He reaches toward the nightstand where he keeps the condoms.

I grab his arm and wait for him to look at me. His stare goes straight to my mouth.

"I want to feel you. All of you."

His gaze moves from my lips to my eyes. "You're sure?"

I nod rapidly. "I was just at the doctor and I'm on birth control."

"I've been tested recently too," he says, still watching me intently as if waiting for any sign that I might change my mind. "And I've never not used a condom."

"Me either." Because I know how much he relies on all his other senses, being the first person to experience this with him makes me feel even closer to him.

Archer moves back over me. The head of his dick nudges my entrance. I widen my legs as he pushes in an inch. He groans and lets his head drop so his forehead rests against mine.

His right hand caresses my throat, greedy for every vibration. And I give them to him, mindlessly talking and panting as he slowly fills me. He's so big and thick it's almost painful until I adjust to his size.

I sigh, feeling as content as I do turned on. He twitches inside me and I clench around his cock.

"Fuck, baby. I'm not going to last long."

“Me either.” I’m already climbing toward orgasm without him moving. I drag my nails up his arms to his shoulders and then I bring my hands to either side of his face. He meets my stare with a hazy expression. “Fuck me like you love me.”

His lips twist into a grin and he gives me a soft kiss before he pulls out and then thrusts back in.

I love watching the way his face contorts with a mix of torture and pleasure.

“Damn that feels good.” His breathing is labored. “You take me so well.”

The praise makes me lightheaded. I’m out of my mind with sensation, unable to form a coherent reply. Instead, I chant his name on a loop. I don’t know if he can hear me, but I know he can tell I’m close because he moves faster the louder I get.

Everything else is forgotten except him and the orgasm hanging right on the brink.

His lips cover mine.

“I love you,” he says the words against my mouth and then kisses me hard. His tongue sweeps in and I meet his energy.

A flash of light blooms behind my eyelids and I cry out. He swallows every noise and gives me all of his too.

Archer’s orgasm follows seconds after mine. He keeps kissing me even after he stops moving inside me. He pulls out slowly, gaze locked on where his cum leaks out of me. With one finger, he gathers it up and pushes it back in. My sensitive pussy quivers at the intrusion.

He grins at my reaction and adds another finger, slowly dragging them in and out of me until I’m arching into his palm for more friction.

“Let me hear how good I make you feel, baby.”

I lock onto his gaze. “So good. I never want you to stop.”

One side of his mouth hitches up higher. “Only for food and water and other mandatory things. Every other second is yours.”

He scoots down my body and flicks his tongue along my clit. I’m already seeing flashes of light when he curls his fingers and sucks hard on my sensitive flesh.

As I come down from another incredible high, Archer falls onto the mattress beside me and pulls me to my side so we’re chest to chest.

“I have bad news,” I say and then nuzzle into him.

“What’s that?”

I tip my head back to look at him as I say, "I need food and water."

I barely ate dinner last night and I am starving.

He chuckles and places a quick kiss against my forehead before sitting up. Reluctantly, I follow. We get dressed slowly, stealing more kisses as we do.

Archer pulls on a T-shirt over his head. "Have you heard any more from Eleanor?"

"No." I shake my head. "But I'm feeling okay about it."

He makes a low grunt of annoyance that tells me he's definitely not feeling okay about it yet.

"What if I talk to her?" he asks. "I could explain everything about Graham."

"No." I shake my head. "You've done enough. I've got this. Okay?"

It takes a second, but he nods reluctantly.

The rest of the apartment is quiet as we leave his room. London and Brogan must be sleeping in. In the kitchen, I flip on the light.

"Are you sure you don't want to stage a fake breakup?" he asks, stepping into the room behind me. "It wouldn't be that hard to hide it from him. You could even still go to the games. Though you'd probably have to pretend like you're there for Brogan instead of me." He winks.

"Not a chance, Holland." I place my hands on his shoulders and jump. He catches me, holding my legs up while I wrap them around his waist. "I want him to know you're the man giving me multiple orgasms and making me deliriously happy."

A groan from the living room makes my body go still. I glance to the couch as a man I don't recognize sits up and runs a hand through reddish-brown hair. I jump down from Archer's grasp and place a hand to my chest.

The stranger slowly blinks and then gives us a one-hand salute. He's broad and muscular, and not wearing a shirt.

Archer looks at the guy with much less alarm than I had. "Right. I forgot to warn you. Flynn showed up last night. He's crashing here for a while."

"Your younger brother," I say, voice unsteady as I struggle to calm my racing pulse. It's easy to place him now that I'm not panicking. Between the games I watched with Archer and the family resemblance, I'd like to think I would have eventually put it together on my own. "Nice to meet you."

Flynn stands with what looks like a lot of effort. "You too. I'm guessing you're the infamous secret sister."

“This is Sabrina,” Archer tells him.

Flynn wanders into the kitchen with us and opens the fridge. When he pulls out a beer, Archer steps over to him and takes it.

“It’s not even noon.”

“I’m on vacation.” Flynn snatches it back. He cracks open the tab and takes a seat on one of the barstools. It’s uncanny how much he looks like Archer in certain ways. Same straight nose, same full lips and half smile. Flynn’s reddish-brown hair curls around his ears. And he still has a bit of a baby face, even though he’s taller than Archer, and I know he’s nearly twenty-one.

“I had the weirdest dream last night. There was this little girl—a princess—and then in walked this smoking hot blonde chick wearing a black dress that hugged her curves perfectly.”

“You met Olivia and Greer?” I ask, looking from Flynn to Archer.

“That wasn’t a dream,” Archer tells him. “We were babysitting Greer last night and Olivia came by to get her after you crashed on the couch.”

“Olivia,” he says her name slowly. He glances at me. His eyes are still only half-open either from sleep or being hungover, I’m not sure, but I can tell the color is a lighter brown instead of hazel like Archer’s. “Is she a friend of yours?”

Before I can answer, Archer interrupts. “Does Knox know you’re here?”

All playfulness leaves Flynn’s face and in its place is a tight jaw and serious expression that makes him look older. “I told you, I don’t want to go back there yet.”

“That’s fine. You can stay as long as you like, but he’s blowing up the group chat this morning wondering if anyone’s heard from you.”

The emotions that cross over Flynn’s face are a mixture of guilt and frustration.

“Did you tell him I was here?” Flynn asks.

“No, but you should. He’ll worry about you until he knows where you are.”

“He’ll worry either way,” Flynn grumbles as he gets up and heads back to the couch. He glances back, then adds, “I’ll text him today.”

“Good.” Archer wraps his arms around me and kisses my shoulder. “I need to shower before practice. Are you going to the studio today?”

“Yes, and I work at Lilac tonight,” I remind him.

Despite wanting to spend every second together, we both have a lot of

mandatory things on our schedules.

“I’ll try to stop by this afternoon, but I have a receiver meeting after team practice.”

His jaw tightens an awful lot like his little brother’s did just a few moments ago.

“Are you going to be okay?” I ask him. I can’t imagine having to work alongside Walker Graham all day long. Especially knowing how he taunts Archer every chance he gets.

“Me?” he asks, raising one brow. “I should be asking you that.”

“You have,” I remind him. “And I’m fine.”

He doesn’t look like he believes me.

“Okay, fine is a stretch, but I’ve accepted it, and I decided I’m not letting him run me off. Maybe he’ll sell the building or maybe he won’t, but I can only control what I can control. Even if Eleanor found another buyer, there’s no guarantees with them either. I’m going to make that dance studio everything I ever dreamed, and if eventually I have to find another place, it will be okay. I know lots of big, strong men who can help me.”

He looks at me with all the awe that I feel when I watch him play football or interact with Greer.

“I’d do anything for you,” he says.

“I know. Which is just another reason I’m not faking shit for some guy who is intimidated by how talented you are.”

That might not be how Archer looks at it but if Walker wasn’t threatened by him, he wouldn’t need to go to such lengths to piss off Archer and make his life hell. Seriously, who has time for that?

“Fuck, I love you,” he says as he closes his eyes and presses his lips to mine.

I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of hearing that.

ARCHER

“I’ll have a Jack and Coke,” Flynn says as he slides onto a stool in front of the bar.

“Save the Jack.” Brogan side-eyes Flynn as he takes a seat on his right. I take the one on his left. “And a Modelo.”

“Blue Moon for me. Thanks,” I tell the bartender, who looks like he’s already had a tough night and isn’t in the mood to deal with us.

“You two are no fun anymore,” Flynn says.

“Maybe you want to lay off the drinking for a night,” I say. “The living room still smells like a liquor cabinet.”

I get a very predictable eye roll from my younger brother.

“You know, I can get served pretty much everywhere without an I.D.”

“A minor in possession charge will not help things right now, Baby Holland.” Brogan tips his head to the bartender as he sets his beer in front of him.

I nod my agreement. Flynn still hasn’t said much about being cut from the team, but he’s always been one that needs to come around to talking on his own. Trying to force it out of him will just make him close off more.

Brogan, however, is not that patient.

“What the hell happened in Minnesota?” he asks, swiveling in his seat to stare down Flynn.

“I lost the most important game of the season.”

“So did the rest of your teammates,” I remind him.

“It’s not the same and you know it.”

“Fuck that,” Brogan says.

I tip my beer to him in a silent cheers. I wholeheartedly agree. Fuck that.

“I’ll be fine. My agent says Boston’s interested and the Cardinals might be looking for a new pitcher if their starter needs surgery.”

Despite his words, I can see the uncertainty taking a toll on him. As it would anyone in his shoes.

“You’ll land somewhere,” I say, in case he needs to hear it. He’s too talented and has too much promise to have his career end so abruptly.

The three of us order food from the bar and fall into easy conversation while eating and watching a hockey game on the TV above the bar. A classmate from college, Jordan Thatcher, plays for the Kings and they’re destroying Colorado.

While I’m ordering another beer, Brogan’s phone lights up on the bar in front of him.

“It’s London. She’s out with her sister tonight. Probably drunk dialing.” Grinning, he stands with his phone. “Be right back.”

Flynn watches him go, then glances at me. “It’s weird to see you two like this.”

“What do you mean?”

“Brogan with a fiancée.” Flynn flings a hand in the direction Brogan went and then waves it in front of me. “And you all sweet and lovey with Sabrina.”

“It’s not that strange. We’ve both dated people before.”

“Yeah, but this is different. You’re all grown up and mature and shit.”

A laugh rumbles in my chest. “Yeah, well, don’t be fooled. We’re not that mature.”

I reach over and grab him in a headlock, then ruffle his hair with my free hand.

He escapes, smoothing both hands over his head. “Not the hair. Chicks love the hair.”

“Now *that’s* weird,” I tell him, still chuckling. It’s nice sitting and talking with him. I can’t remember the last time we did this. “Are you dating anyone?”

“I’m dating everyone.” He flashes a cocky smile.

“Oh, brother,” I mutter under my breath with another huff of laughter.

“I talked to Dad before I left Minnesota. He’s thinking about settling back in Arizona.”

All those good feelings I was just enjoying, vanish.

“How is dear old Dad?” I ask him, taking a long drink of my beer.

“You’d know if you picked up the phone.”

A prickle works its way down my spine. I can’t remember the last time I talked to my dad on my own. Since Flynn started having a relationship with him, I’ve run into him a few times but at best we’re acquaintances. I don’t need him.

“Listen, I get why you want a relationship with him, but I don’t need or want him in my life,” I say to Flynn in case he has any ideas about pushing me to change my mind.

I really do understand Flynn’s desire to get to know him. He was too little to remember what it was like, how Dad was never around. Even before the accident, he was flaky but that seemed to be the final straw. I told Knox once that Dad left because he didn’t want to deal with me after I lost my hearing. It was one of those moments where I spoke my darkest fear, one of those things you hold on to, afraid even to give it a voice. I’d thought it for years, silently worrying that I was the reason that my brothers had lost a second parent. Saying it out loud finally helped me let it go.

And Knox didn’t try to talk me out of my feelings. I’ll never forget what he said. “If that’s true, then we’re all better off.”

Just like that. I guess I expected him to hate me a little for being the reason, but he didn’t.

I don’t know if it’s really the reason he took off or not, but I believe it played a part. Just one more problem he didn’t want to deal with. He isn’t the only one who stepped out of my life after I lost my hearing, but his loss was the worst. He hadn’t been a great dad before that but everything I’d learned about family said they’re supposed to love you no matter what. Maybe that’s not a reasonable ask, even for a parent.

Knox’s words all those years ago healed something inside me. The hurt for being abandoned and the need to keep out anyone that wasn’t going to accept me exactly as I am.

So, no, I don’t have any desire to let him back into my life, but Flynn never really had a chance at a relationship with either of our parents. He’ll never be able to get time back with our mom, but he can with dad. Far be it for me to hold that universal need against him.

Flynn turns slightly in his seat. “I know what he was like back then.”

I lift a brow in challenge. Flynn was little when Dad was living with us,

and with four big brothers, we shielded him from a lot. So no, I don't think he really knows what Dad was like.

"He told me," Flynn says, adamant in his tone. "All of it. How he wasn't around much and when he was, he was irritable and moody. How he took off and left Knox in charge. And lots more. He hasn't tried to be someone he isn't with me. I know who he was back then. He screwed up. He knows it and so do I. And he also knows that there's a good chance none of you will ever forgive him. But he's still trying."

"Sometimes it's too little, too late. The damage is done." I don't have the anger about it that Knox does, but maybe that's because my life didn't change as much as his did. He had to quit school, get a job, put his dreams on hold. My desire to keep our dad at an arm's length isn't rooted in anger, just a healthy dose of caution. I have people in my life who love and support me. My brothers, my friends, Sabrina. Why would I let someone back in that's already shown me they can't do that?

"All I'm saying is people change." Flynn has that same hopeful optimistic look in his eye that he did when we were kids and he'd get excited or passionate about something.

"Do they?" I ask, standing. Hope and optimism are things I've given up on when it comes to Dad.

"I mean, look at Brogan." He lifts his chin toward the corner of the bar where Brogan is on the phone. He's holding it out in front of him, grinning like a fool, no doubt video chatting with London.

"Not long ago he was hooking up with half the city and now he's engaged to be married." Flynn says the last part like the idea is too insane to process.

"I'll give you that. I did not see it coming."



After we leave the bar, Flynn meets up with some high school friends that have moved to the area, and I convince Brogan to stop at Lilac Lounge on the way home.

"I just want to pop in and say hi," I say as we get out of the truck. My feet move quickly, eating up the space to the front door of the club.

The bass vibrates through the floor as soon as I step inside. I scan the space for her red hair. I spot Olivia first behind the bar.

I look back to Brogan and tip my head toward Olivia before moving her way. She smiles as she sees me approach.

“Hey!” she yells over the music. “Does she know you’re coming?”

“Nah, wanted to surprise her,” I shout back. And I couldn’t wait until later tonight to see her. “Is she dancing?”

“Yeah. Outside. Do you want something to drink?”

“Nah.” I shake my head.

Brogan comes to stand next to me and she looks to him.

“What about you?” she asks.

“I guess I’ll have a beer while I wait.” He pulls out his wallet to pay her.

“I’m going to go find Sabrina,” I say over their conversation.

Brogan nods. “Say hi to my sister.”

The club isn’t busy inside, but outside the patio is packed with people, talking, drinking, and looking out at the pool. I pause, looking toward the cages on either side of the front stage. Sabrina is on the left, dancing in her spandex black shorts and purple top.

My heart pumps faster with each step closer. I can’t get all the way to her because there’s a bouncer blocking my path, but I go as far as I can and then wait for her to see me.

The way she moves is graceful and fluid, and sexy as hell. I’m ready to break some rules to get to her if necessary.

Luckily it doesn’t come to that. Her gaze moves over the patio with an almost bored expression, but she doubles back when she sees me. She stops dancing for a moment and her mouth pulls into a wide smile.

I lift a hand in a wave.

She flips herself over a bar on the cage to get out and then breezes by the bouncer to me.

“What are you doing here?” she asks, throwing her arms around my neck. Her skin is soft and warm, and she smells like my body soap.

“I wanted to make sure I saw you and wished you good luck for tomorrow.”

“You would have seen me later.”

“Yeah, but when you crawl into my bed late at night, talking tends to be the last thing I want to do.”

Her lips part as she grins bigger. “Are you here by yourself?”

“Brogan’s at the bar. We’re not staying, I just had to see you. Had to tell you I’m proud as hell of you. What you’ve done with the studio is nothing

short of incredible. I wish I could be there tomorrow to watch people fall in love with it.”

I should have told her all this earlier today, but with Flynn showing up and everything else, I got sidetracked. That’s my bad. She needs to know. *Deserves to know.*

“The kids are going to adore you. You’re going to be such an inspiration to them. Hell, you’re an inspiration to me.”

She is. She’s worked so hard, never asking for anything from anyone. Watching Sabrina fight for her dreams woke up something inside of me.

Her eyes sparkle and fill with tears that don’t fall. And I’m suddenly aware that we’re at a club and not alone.

“Sorry for going all sappy on you at work.” One side of my mouth pulls up.

“Are you kidding? I’m going to make you say all that again so I can record it and replay it when I need the reminder.”

“You don’t need a recording, baby. I’ll tell you every single day.”

SABRINA

The morning of the grand opening, I get to the studio before the sun is up. I hardly slept last night. I was exhausted when I got home from working at Lilac but too keyed up for today to do anything but toss and turn and accidentally keep Archer up most of the night with me.

I offered to go sleep on the couch since Flynn is crashing in my room, but he wouldn't hear of it. I made a pot of extra strong coffee before I left so hopefully that helps him get through the day.

There isn't much to do to prepare. London made a banner for the outside window that says, RIBBONS & TWIRLS NOW OPEN, so I hang that, then I turn on all the lights and start the music. The plan is to keep the door open and let people wander in to check it out. Saturdays are pretty busy in the neighborhood, so I'm hoping for a lot of foot traffic.

Official classes start next week, but the dance floor area is open if kids want to check it out while I talk to their parents. I also have orange juice and donuts, and mocktails in case the adults need a reason to linger and let me convince them my studio is the perfect place for their kids.

At eight o'clock I prop open the front door. My heart is beating wildly in my chest. This is it!

I pace the studio, not quite sure what to do with myself while I wait. Only minutes pass, but it feels like an eternity before the first people step inside.

I flash them my biggest smile and then freeze.

"Mom? Dad?" I'm shocked as I stare between my parents. *My parents*

standing in my dance studio.

“Surprise!” Dad beams at me.

I hurry toward them, throat thick with emotion and tears already blurring my vision. I wrap an arm around both their necks and let them wrap me up in one of our family hugs that I have missed so much.

“How are you here right now?” I ask when I pull back and swipe at the wet drops sliding down my cheeks.

“As if we were going to miss this.” My mom sounds outright annoyed that I’d think otherwise.

“You didn’t have to come all the way here,” I say. They weren’t big travelers before my mom got sick, but since then, they’ve rarely left, not even for a weekend trip. I’ve kept them updated on the studio with pictures and videos. I never expected them to show up. “I’m so glad you did though.”

I hug them again, and some of the nerves I’ve been holding on to fall away.

“The place looks great, pumpkin.” Dad surveys the space with pride shimmering in his eyes.

“Do you want the full tour?” I step forward before they can answer and stop at the refreshment table. Dad has a major sweet tooth. Predictably, he swoops up a donut.

There isn’t a lot to show them really, but they listen intently as I explain every little thing I did to make this place mine. The last stop I make is to a framed photo on the wall behind the front desk. It’s a picture of me and my mom at my very first dance recital. She was Mother Ginger in our performance of *The Nutcracker*, and I was a bon bon.

“Oh wow.” Mom stares at the photograph. “Look at my hair. I forgot how long it was back then.”

She touches her shorter locks with one hand. I hardly remember it being as long as it is in the old picture. She cut it to about shoulder length when I was in junior high, and then when she started chemo went even shorter to a cute pixie cut. It’s grown out now, almost to chin length.

“I’m so glad you’re here.” My voice breaks and I rest my head on her shoulder.

“Oh, honey.” My mom tries to smile, but it falls as she studies my face. “What’s going on? I thought you’d be happy.”

“I am. The day hasn’t even started and it’s already more than I dreamed. It’s just that everything has been so chaotic. The building owner is selling,

and the new landlord is an asshole. I might have done all of this for nothing.” Just for a moment I give into that fear, then shake it off. “It’s the opening and I’m already worrying about the ending.” I swipe at a few more tears. “And I missed you guys so much.” I fling myself at her again.

She wraps her arms around me, then gently taps my back in soft, reassuring pats. “Only happy tears today.”

“I don’t want to lose this place. I know I haven’t even taught a class yet, so it’s silly to be so attached, but it feels like I am exactly where I should be.”

“Then you’ll figure it out. You always do. You’re a fighter.” She pushes my hair back away from my face and speaks the words like fact.

“I must get it from you.”

A small smile lifts the corners of her mouth. There’s commotion outside and I can see a group of women scoping out the studio through the window. I guess it’s time to pull myself together.

“How long are you staying?” I ask them.

“Through the weekend,” Mom says. “We rented a cute little house not far from here.”

“Can we hang out later?” I ask.

“Absolutely. We’re at your beck and call.”

“I want to meet this boy I keep hearing about too,” Dad says, voice gruff and stern.

“Archer,” I say, smiling even thinking about him meeting my parents. “And maybe you can finally meet Brogan too.”

“We’d like that,” Mom says as two women slowly enter with timid smiles.

I smile back brightly at them. “Welcome!”

Mom leans in and whispers, “We’ll get out of your way and let you talk with other people.”

I know I need to go mingle, but I don’t want them to leave.

“Okay. I’ll text you as soon as I’m done here.” I hug Mom and then Dad. I hadn’t planned on it, but now I wonder how it ever could have felt this perfect without her here today. “Thank you so much for coming.”

After those first people trickle in, others follow. Families, parents with their kids, moms out to brunch, and some locals who just want to see what’s happening in the neighborhood.

I’m dizzy with excitement as I talk with all of them. I’ve hardly had a chance to breathe when Olivia and Greer show up.

“Congratulations!” Olivia hugs me with one arm. In her other, she has a big bouquet of yellow roses. “These are for you, but I’m not sure where you’ll find room for them.”

I take them from her, blushing as I set them on the front desk with the others.

“Archer?” she asks.

“And Brogan. I think they were seeing who could send the biggest, most embarrassing display.” They had practice and meetings so they couldn’t be here today, but I felt their presence. “And my parents drove down for the weekend to surprise me. Now that you two are here it’s just been the perfect day.”

“They’re proud of you. So are we.” She looks down at Greer.

“Are all these people going to take dance classes from you?” Her big, green eyes stare around the studio with wonder.

“Probably not, but hopefully some of them.”

There are two girls dancing together in front of the barre. One has on a purple tutu and a big matching bow on each pigtail.

“Those two will be in your Wednesday afternoon class,” I tell her.

“Really?”

“Yep.” I nod.

She goes from excited to bashful, looking down at her shoes.

“Why don’t you go say hi and introduce yourself,” Olivia says.

It takes a few seconds, but she does, walking slowly toward them.

“How’s the opening going?” Olivia asks once Greer’s gone.

“Really good. Two classes are already full and lots of people have taken flyers or signed up for the mailing list.” I can hardly believe it. Today has felt like magic.

Her jaw drops open. “Sabrina! That’s wonderful.”

“I know. I’m freaking out a little. I thought I would have weeks, maybe months, working part-time here and the club.”

“Are you going to quit Lilac?”

“At minimum I’ll have to cut back.”

She lets her bottom lip stick out, which makes her look a lot like her daughter when she’s pouting. “When am I going to see you?”

“We will make time. I promise.”



By late afternoon, the refreshment table is empty, all the flyers are gone, and I am exhausted. A happy exhaustion. Another class filled up and I met a young woman with experience in teaching teens and adults looking for part-time hours.

I clean up quickly and am turning off the music when Archer shows up.

“Is it too late to sign up for dance classes?” he asks as he steps into the studio.

I’m so relieved to see him, I take off at a jog and launch myself into his arms. He catches me easily, spinning me around as I pepper him with kisses.

“You came!” I say when I pull back.

“Of course. Although it looks like I missed all the fun. I heard you were busy today.”

“Who did you hear that from?”

“London came by.”

“She did? I didn’t see her.”

He nods. “She said the place was packed. She didn’t want to interrupt.”

I’m sorry I missed her, but it means so much that she came.

“There were so many people.” A grin breaks free on my face. “I think I blacked out for half of it.”

“An instant hit.” He presses his mouth to mine in a quick kiss. “We should celebrate tonight. Dinner?”

“Yes.”

He sets me on the floor, and I quickly grab my purse and turn off the lights.

“Where do you want to go?” he asks as we head out the front door. “Do you want me to invite Brogan and London too?”

“That depends,” I say, fighting a smirk as I lock the door behind us. When I’m done, I face him. “Do you want backup when you meet my parents?”

His brows lift and the second my words register, a flash of panic crosses his face.

“They’re in town for the weekend. And very excited to meet you.” I look at him hopefully. I know springing the parents on him is a lot, but he’s going to have to meet them eventually because I’m in this for the long haul.

He wears his nerves in a sheepish grin for me to see. “Wow, parents. That’s...” He trails off and runs a hand over his jaw. “You know, actually, I’m not feeling great. Maybe we should celebrate next weekend.”

I laugh at the adorable fear in his eyes. “Relax. They’re going to love you. Just like I do.”

ARCHER

The noise of the stadium vibrates through me as we take the field. Adrenaline pumps along with the music. I know I don't hear it like everyone else, but the moment still hits me.

I scan the crowd until I find Sabrina. Her family is up in one of the sky boxes today and she's at the front, jumping and screaming.

My chest swells with pride. That smart, talented, beautiful girl is mine. I hold my right hand up, making half a heart and aiming it at her. She doesn't miss a beat, giving me the same sign right back.

We're playing the Vikings today, and Brogan and my old college teammate is their quarterback. I nudge Brogan as I spot Felix. His mouth curves into a smile and we jog toward the fifty-yard line where he's throwing passes.

He holds up a hand to his guys to let them know he needs a minute and then turns to us.

"Holland and Six," he says. We clap hands and hug, then he does the same with Brogan.

"How's it going?" I ask him. The Vikings are having a great season, thanks in large part to him.

"Good. No complaints. How about you guys?"

"Ready to kick your ass," Brogan says.

Felix tips his head back and laughs. "You're exactly the same."

"How's the family? Is Dahlia here?"

His smile widens and he gets that same sappy look on his face that Brogan does when asked about London. I wonder if I get that look when I talk about Sabrina. Damn, I guess I'm a sappy fool now too.

"Yeah, she's here." He points and we follow his line of sight until we see her. She waves and we do too.

"Man, it feels like just yesterday we were all playing together at Valley." I shake my head. So much has changed, but just standing here with these two, it takes me right back there.

"I heard you got engaged," Felix says to Brogan.

"That's right. And she's here so I'm sorry but I was serious about kicking your ass. I need to look good in front of my girl."

"What about you?" Felix asks me.

"I also need to kick your ass to look good for a girl."

"He's dating my sister," Brogan says with a fake grimace that turns into a smile.

"Sister?" Felix asks, brows rising.

"It's a long story." Brogan slaps his shoulder. "We should catch up sometime."

"I'll be back in town for a few days at the end of the month," Felix says. "I'll give you a call."

"Can't wait." I take his hand, and we say our goodbyes for now.

Back on our side of the field, Brogan and I fall into our usual warmups. I'm aware of Graham nearby, but I do my best to ignore him. Things have been great the past couple of days, and I don't want to get sucked back into his bullshit.

I manage to forget Graham exists until the start of the game. The Vikings win the coin toss and receive the ball.

Felix fires a couple bullets right out of the gate, and I whistle under my breath. Damn he's good.

"Admiring the view from the sideline?" Graham asks with a snort.

I say nothing in return, and he steps into my space.

"I asked if you were enjoying the view?" he asks again.

"Not anymore."

A snarl curls his lip as he steps back beside me. "Get used to it. This is where you're going to be spending the rest of the season watching me run the ball into the end zone."

My blood boils, but I don't give him what he wants, which is a reaction.

“How’s Sabrina?” he asks next. “I heard her little dance studio opened. I can’t wait to stop by after I sign the papers. Maybe she and I can grab lunch.”

I step in front of him so close he has to take a step back. “You can talk shit about me all you want, but you’re not going to speak her name in front of me. Got that?”

His jaw tightens and his blue eyes bore into me.

“I’ll kick your ass and then hand you over to Brogan who will do it all over again.” I glance up to the skybox and find Sabrina’s eyes on me, taking in the scene with Graham. Even from this far away I can tell she’s wearing a worried expression. She makes a heart with one hand, and I realize that I can either spend the rest of this game riled up over Graham and his bullshit or I can put him out of my mind and play football. I choose the latter.

Fuck this dude.

I step away from him and walk over to Brogan.

He glances over at me. “Are you good?”

“Yeah. I’m fucking great.”

Vikings score a touchdown and make the extra point. It’s going to be a battle today with Felix at the top of his game.

As I take the field with the rest of the offense, I push away all the noise. Which is especially difficult considering Coach has me and Graham on the field at the same time.

Cody calls the play, and we break and head to the line of scrimmage. I meet Brogan’s stare and nod to let him know I’m ready.

When the ball is snapped, I run my route, sprinting down the field to get open. Cody hits me with a perfect pass. I catch the ball and then eye the defenders closing in on me. I slip by one with a fake and then run like hell. I’m taken down at the twenty for the first down.

“Fuck yeah.” Brogan finds me and knocks his helmet against mine. “Let’s fucking go.”

The next snap is a handoff that earns us another five yards. When we huddle up for the next play, I find myself standing next to Graham.

“This one is mine,” he says to Cody. “They’re leaving me wide open. I could have run that pass to Holland all the way in.”

Cody isn’t a confrontational guy so he ignores him and everyone else does too, which I can tell just makes Graham more annoyed. What an idiot. He’s all angry and pouting. I almost laugh as I picture a big giant baby head attached to his body.

On the next two snaps, the defense stops us, and the special teams are called in for the kick.

As I predicted, the game is tough. Felix and his offense are on fire and our defense struggles to shut them down. We stay in it by pushing past theirs in the same way. Every step onto the field, I'm ready and dialed in. Cody and I are having one of those special games where he finds me through the defense, and I rack up the yardage.

At halftime, Brogan jogs beside me to the locker room.

"What is happening?" he asks, grinning wide and proud. "You're unstoppable."

"Gotta impress a girl." I wink at him, which has him cackling.

Graham continues pouting and griping to anyone and everyone who will listen. By the time the third quarter starts, he's getting a wide berth from the team and coaches. A bad attitude can spread, and this second half is going to take all we've got.

Coach changes things up and Graham is left on the sideline. He tosses his helmet and gets a side-eye from the coaching staff.

I pause beside him to put on my helmet before taking the field. "Don't worry, Graham. I'll put you in the backpack today."

Without waiting for his reply, I take the field. Petty? Probably. But damn, it feels good.

"Ready to get into the end zone?" Cody asks me.

"Hell yeah."

He lets a grin slip, then calls the play. As I get into position at the line of scrimmage, adrenaline pumps through me so hard that I have to wiggle my fingers to release some of the energy ready to burst out of me. The Vikings' defensive line is big and ugly, and ready to pummel us into the ground.

At the snap, I move quickly, slipping by the purple jerseys and running down the field.

At the fifty-yard line, I glance back. The defense is making it hard for Cody to make a throw, so I keep going, watching and waiting. Cody shuffles left and gets off the pass as he's taken down.

Everything goes quiet for me. I don't hear the crowd yelling my name or the defense chasing after me. It's just the ball sailing toward me and my legs pumping hard down the field. I lift my hands as the ball inches closer and drops into my outstretched fingers. I catch it and hold the fuck on as I sprint into the end zone.

The noise comes back in a wave as I stop running. My heart is still racing, and the ball is palmed in one hand.

Brogan is the first to reach me.

“Unstoppable!” he yells, getting right up into my face, then backs up to give me room to have my moment in the spotlight. I lift the football in my hand as I jog the width of the end zone in my usual celebration move. I stop in front of a camera that’s following the action, toss the ball, and hold up half a heart for my girl.

ARCHER

When I get to the sky box after the game, Sabrina rushes forward like she's going to launch herself into my arms. I drop my bag and catch her the moment she does just that. She kisses me as I spin us around.

"You were fantastic! Amazing! Incredible! You won! I'm so turned on right now!" She says all of it in a rush, beaming at me and holding my face in her hands.

A chuckle tries to break free but then she's kissing me again. Winning has never felt this good.

I tangle one hand in her hair, and I kiss her with everything I have. Today was because of her. Because I knew she was here cheering me on, loving me like no one else has. Because she showed me what it is like to stand up and fight for what you want.

She could have given up when Graham bought the studio, but she didn't. She didn't even consider it for a second.

Being with her has made me want to be a better man. She's made me realize what's important and what's just noise.

I feel her go still in my arms and then she says, "Oops."

I pull away from her slowly and finally look at the other people crowded around us. They're all staring at us. Brogan hides his smirk by glancing down at the ground, and I feel my face heat as I smile at Sabrina's parents.

Loosening my grip, I let my girl slide down my body until her feet are on the ground.

“Good to see you again, Mr. and Mrs. Whitlock,” I say, wrapping one arm around their daughter.

Her mom is a few inches shorter than Sabrina with short blonde hair and gray-blue eyes that crinkle in the corners when she smiles. The adoration as she looks at her daughter is hard to miss. Her dad too. He’s a big guy – tall and stout. He has a thick head full of gray hair and a beard that’s trimmed short. He’s wearing an old Mavericks jersey donning the name of one of my all-time favorite wide receivers to play the game.

“That was quite a game,” Mr. Whitlock says, extending a hand.

I shake it and thank him.

“I don’t know the last time I enjoyed watching football so much.” Sabrina’s mom steps forward and embraces me. She’s a hugger. I just met her last night, but I bet she hugged me a dozen times already. It’s nice. Makes me think of my mom and wonder what she would have thought of Sabrina. I know she would have loved her, but I still would have enjoyed seeing them together. I’m not sure how I feel about God and the afterlife, but I like to think she’s smiling at me wherever she is.

We linger in the sky box. Most of the stadium has cleared and the field is empty. Sabrina and I are standing with her dad while he asks me about the season and tells me stories about games he’s been to. He’s been a Mavericks fan longer than I’ve been alive.

I like him a lot. He’s different than my dad, older, more talkative and friendly. My dad, even at his best, was introverted and kept to himself. He liked being around people but was never the one doing a lot of talking. I don’t know if that’s who he is or just how I remember it. I guess I’ll never really know him.

Being with the Whitlocks doesn’t replace that small stab of pain of not having my own parents here, but it does make me realize that in five or ten years when I have my own family, I want to be a husband and dad who shows up and makes others feel welcome.

As we’re getting ready to leave, I find myself alone with Sabrina.

“Your brother found a new best friend,” I say and nod my head toward Brogan. He’s got one arm thrown over Mrs. Whitlock’s shoulders and she’s laughing too hard she can barely stand upright.

“I had an inkling that might happen. She always wanted more kids and Brogan is twenty-five going on ten.” Sabrina smiles and rests her head on my shoulder.

“You good?” I ask, moving so I can look into her eyes. She seems a little melancholy as the minutes pass.

“Yeah,” she says automatically and not at all convincing.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m just worried about her.” She glances over to her mom and back to me. “I know it doesn’t make sense. She’s been healthy for months now and she looks great, but I just have this gnawing ache thinking about being away from her again.”

“Do you want to move back to Flagstaff?” Even asking the question has my gut churning. I can’t imagine waking up every day without her.

“No. I love it here. And I don’t actually think it would be any easier if I saw her all the time. I’m always just going to worry.”

“Can I tell you my biggest regret with my mom?”

She nods and gives me her undivided attention, even stepping another foot closer. “Of course.”

“I was younger than you when my mom was sick, so I know it isn’t the same, but I used to worry about her too. So much that it consumed me when she was around. I didn’t enjoy the good days that I had with her because I was so wrapped up in my own fear.”

She squeezes my hand. “I’m so sorry. That had to have been really hard to see your mom sick that young. Of course you were scared.”

“Thanks.” I squeeze her back. “The other thing I’ve realized as the years have passed is that she was scared too. God, she must have been so scared. She needed people to comfort her, and instead I was consumed with my own need for everything to be okay. I wish I had been one of those people for her more than anything.”

“Oh my god, I’m a selfish jerk.” She buries her head in my chest, and I feel her groan vibrate against me.

“No.” I chuckle softly and reach forward with one hand to tip up her chin. “You’re not selfish. You’re human. She’s your mom and you don’t want to lose her. But she doesn’t want to lose you either.”

“Thank you.” She lifts onto her toes and places a kiss on my lips, lingering there like she’s breathing me in.

“You’re welcome.”

We break apart and walk hand in hand to the rest of our group.

Brogan meets my gaze and smiles. Happiness practically radiates off him. I have a feeling he’s become an honorary Whitlock and I’m glad for him. He

should have had a family like this instead of the shitty parents who left him to fend for himself.

“Should we have everyone back to our place and order some food?” he asks me.

I nod my approval, but Sabrina’s mom interjects, “We should probably go back to our place and get out of your hair.”

“But you leave tomorrow,” Sabrina says.

I smile and try my best to look as sincere as I feel when I say, “We’d love to have you come see the apartment and have dinner with us.”

Her dad shrugs. “Can’t say no to that.”

Sabrina and I walk behind the rest of the group.

She swings our hands between us. “Thank you for being so great with them.”

“I like them a lot. I can see a little of you in each of them.”

“You know...” She trails off and smiles at me hesitantly. “It might not be too late to repair things with your dad. Maybe you have more good days ahead of you?”

“I don’t know.” I shake my head. “We didn’t have a lot of good times even before he left us.”

“I wasn’t there, and I can’t imagine it. My parents have been hovering over me since I was a baby. But you’re a good man, Archer Holland. If any part of you wants some sort of relationship with him now despite the past, then don’t let the opportunity pass you by. Life’s too short. And if he still isn’t the father you need or want, then at least you won’t look back and wonder.”

I nod, knowing there’s some truth to her words, but not feeling any more compelled to reach out to the man who left me and my brothers. Opening myself up to that feels like knowingly stepping in front of a bus.

She stops and laces her fingers behind my neck. Everyone else is still walking away, but not us. I’d stand still with her and let the whole world pass us by.

“Either way, I’ll be here with you. Me and you, baby.”

“Me and you.”

ARCHER

The following weeks we're hit with cross-country away games that make it feel like I'm gone more than at home. We return from New York on Monday morning, twelve hours later than scheduled due to some plane mechanical issues.

I am beat and anxious to see my girl, but first I have to get treatment, attend a position meeting, and get in my typical Monday conditioning workout.

"I cannot wait to sleep in my own bed," Brogan says, groaning as he stretches.

When we reach the tarmac, I raise my face to the Arizona sky and breathe in home. There's a nip in the air, but the sun is shining. I've already stripped out of the extra layers I wore to stay warm in the chilly East Coast temps. It snowed during the game, which I always think is kind of fun. Cold but fun.

We drive straight from the airport to the stadium. Coach is standing just inside the building. He's already in his usual practice tracksuit and has coffee in one hand looking a lot more ready to go than the rest of us.

"Holland." He holds up a hand and smiles as we approach. "Six."

"Morning, Coach," Brogan and I say in unison.

"Archer, can you stop by my office after treatment this morning?"

My steps slow as I process his words, and a sinking sensation takes hold of my stomach.

"Yeah. Is everything okay?"

“Nothing to worry about,” he says, like that isn’t exactly what I’ll do for the rest of the morning.

I manage to keep walking, but a million “what if” scenarios pummel me as I head down the hallway to the locker room.

They’re not going to trade you, Brogan signs.

“You can’t know that.”

When he’s fired up, like right now, his signing gets faster and more animated. *Your numbers the past month are stronger than almost anyone else in the league.*

I have been playing well. The best I ever have, but I’ve been around long enough to know that sometimes cuts are made, not based on individual performance, but for the betterment of the team. I’d like to think I’m what’s best for the Mavericks when it comes to my position, but at the end of the day, that’s not my call.

We have to go our separate ways for treatment, but before he leaves, Brogan squeezes my shoulder and looks me in the eye. “Whatever it is, we’ll figure it out together.”

I nod once and swallow down the lump forming in my throat.

My anxiety doesn’t get any better when I see Graham laughing and carrying on like it’s any other day. Since I stopped letting him get under my skin, he’s backed off. He still talks shit any chance he gets, but he isn’t seeking me out like before. And he hasn’t shown up to the studio again. The sale of the building is still moving forward, but I’m not as worried. I know his schedule, and if I have to stand guard at the door of the studio every day, I will.

If I’m still here. Fuck. A new team, a new city, new teammates. No Brogan or Sabrina. I’ll even miss London. Watching her give Brogan a run for his money and seeing the way she adores him. I couldn’t have asked for someone better suited for him. My gut twists at the thought of leaving this life. I’ve always known it was a possibility, but it doesn’t make it any easier.

By the time I walk into Coach’s office, I’ve worked myself into knots. His door is cracked open. I knock and peer inside.

He looks up, glasses perched on the tip of his nose.

“Come in.” He stands and waves me in. “Shut the door behind you.”

My fingers tremble with nervous energy as I do as instructed and then take a seat in front of his desk.

He sits back in his chair, elbows propped on the arms. “I guess I’ll just

cut to the chase since I'm sure you're wondering why I asked you to stop by."

He gives me a wobbly smile that I do my best to return. I rake my sweaty palms down my thighs.

"We are making some changes, and I wanted you to hear it from me first."

I haven't cried since my mom died but damn if emotion doesn't clog my throat and burn the backs of my eyes.

"I've always respected you, Holland. You show up every day, you work hard, and you don't complain. And you probably have more of a right to than anyone else. We've made some tweaks to accommodate you, but I'm aware it's not always enough."

"It's not a problem," I say in a rush. "I mean, I don't need you to make accommodations or treat me any differently."

Even as I speak the words, I know they aren't exactly true. I've never let my hearing be an obstacle in pursuing the things I want, but there are things that just aren't as easy for me. I've done my best to not be an imposition. I'm always watching, always aware, always trying to make up for not being able to hear the coaches or the quarterback.

His brows pinch together, and he removes his glasses. "What is it you think is happening here, son?"

"I assume you're trading me," I say as he stares back at me. Or cutting me. Fuck. Is he going to buy out my contract and cut me loose?

He lets out a laugh that shakes his entire body. "No."

"No?" I study his face for any hint of what he's thinking. I hold off on feeling relieved because maybe there's something else I haven't considered that will suck only slightly less than being cut.

"We've hired an interpreter," he says.

Silence hangs around us as I process. Only I'm not making sense of any of it.

"For what?"

"For you." He laughs again.

"Oh," I say dumbly. Ooooh. I sit forward. "That really isn't necessary. You and the other coaches have been great, and Cody and I have worked out a system. I'm good."

I don't want to make a big deal out of needing special treatment. I've always hated that. And I don't need it. I've figured out how to exist in this

sport and on this team without a lot of hassle or fuss. And beyond that, I have Brogan who I know is always looking out for me. That's enough for me.

He holds up a hand to silence any further objections. "We should have done it the moment we signed you. I'm sorry for that."

I open my mouth to speak, but I'm not sure what to say.

"His name is Max and he will work around your schedule, attend your meetings and practices, and be on the sideline at every game for you. Basically, if you're working, then so is he."

My worry has turned into an unsettling feeling at the team going to such lengths for me. "I appreciate all this. Really, I do, but I don't want —"

He cuts me off with a shake of his head. "Beyond it just being the right thing to do here, we all want to give you the best chance for success because that is only going to make our team stronger. You are a hell of a player already. Let us make it easier for you to focus on all your talent and hard work. When you're working, I want you to only think about football. Nothing else. My hope is that this will allow you to do that."

I'm officially out of protests and a whole lot dumbstruck. This is the last thing I was expecting. I manage to find my voice.

"Thank you, Coach."

He nods and stands, so I do the same.

"We *are* going to be making some changes to the receivers. I guess it won't be secret for long, so I can tell you we made a trade with Washington. We're moving Graham for Hunter."

Lonnie Hunter is one of the best cornerbacks in the league. I fucking hate going up against him, so I'm grateful for him being on my side alone. But Graham gone?

"That's..." I can't lie and say terrible because him leaving makes my life easier, but it doesn't feel good either. No matter how much I hate the guy, I can't bring myself to celebrate his struggle.

"Roster changes are always hard. All we can do is worry about the next game."

"Yes, sir."

His mouth lifts into a smile. "Max will be here tomorrow. Swing by my office when you get in and I'll make the introduction."

With another thanks, I head out of his office.

I'm in a daze as I process what just happened. I can't decide if I feel happy or upset about the team hiring someone just for me. A little of both, I

guess.

In the locker room, Graham is clearing out his stuff and placing it into a bag. He catches my eye and quickly looks away.

I approach him, not really sure what I'm going to say until I get there.

"Good luck in Washington." I hold out my hand to him.

He huffs and eyes my outstretched palm but doesn't shake it. "I don't need your luck or your pity. I'm glad to get out of here. I'm over the fucking heat and desert. Don't worry though, I'm sure we'll still be in touch. I'll have to check in on my building from time to time."

And to think I felt bad for this asshole ten seconds ago.

"Word of advice when you get to Washington. Try working harder than you run your mouth."

With that, I turn and walk off. I hear him yelling after me but can't make out what he says. And for once, I don't care.



When I get to the studio, Sabrina is with a class of kids ages maybe five or six. She stands at the front of the room, and they all face her, listening and mirroring her movements.

I tip my head to the moms sitting in the lobby area watching their children and then I watch Sabrina. She's in one of her sexy black leotards with a pink skirt that moves with her. Her hair is pulled up in a bun and she smiles at her class with so much pride and joy that they can't help but be captivated by her.

At the top of the hour, she stops the music and says goodbye to her class. Each kid gets a high five and a sticker of their choice. When they're all gone, I step inside with her.

As soon as she sees me, her eyes widen and she runs for me, catapulting herself into my arms like she always does. She wraps herself around me, squeezing me as hard as I am her.

"I missed you," she says pulling back. She places a quick kiss on my lips and then hugs me again. "I missed you so much."

"Same. It's been so long I damn near forgot how beautiful you are."

"Well, I didn't forget how handsome you are, but I am really glad to lay my eyes on you." She hops down from my hold but stays close. "Are you

done for the day?”

“Yep. You?”

“That was my last class.”

“Thank god.” I glance back to make sure they’ve all left and then sweep her up into my arms and kiss her again.

She giggles into my mouth, then kisses me back like maybe she did miss me as much as I did her.

“I have news,” I say when we finally pull apart.

“Good news?” she asks, tilting her head and sounding hesitant.

I tell her about the team hiring an interpreter and Graham being traded to Washington. And even what he said about the building.

“Good riddance. At least for most of the year we won’t have to worry about him dropping in whenever he feels like it.”

“There’s more.” My heart rate speeds up as I prepare to tell her the rest. “I stopped by and saw Eleanor on my way over.”

As I expected, Sabrina’s face shows her surprise.

“Archer—”

I hold up a hand. “I know you said that you didn’t want that, but I love you too damn much to stand by and do nothing. Eleanor is a good woman, and she’d want to know what kind of guy she’s handing over her legacy to.”

Sabrina bites at her bottom lip, looking nervous. “What did you say? And what did she say?”

“I was hoping to change her mind about letting him buy the building but turns out she was having cold feet anyway. I didn’t have to say much before she confessed that she was already having second thoughts.”

“She is?”

“Yeah, baby, she is.”

“Does that mean she isn’t selling the building?”

“Yep.” I let my grin break free.

“But what about Florida and taking care of her grandkids?”

“She’s still doing that, and I think she will sell the building eventually. She’s just not ready yet. This place has too many memories for her, and with all the other changes she’s making, she just needs more time.”

“Makes sense,” Sabrina says.

I nod. “So until she’s ready, I convinced her to let me manage things for her.”

“You...” The question trails off.

“Yep. I’m going to act as her management company, and in exchange when she’s ready to sell, you’ll have first dibs before she places it on the market.” I think Eleanor was relieved to have an out, honestly. And the idea of Sabrina being able to own it someday and keep it as a dance studio was too much for her to say no.

Sabrina’s mouth gapes open. If I thought she’d let me buy it for her now, I would. This is the next best thing.

“Are you mad? Please say you aren’t mad.”

“No. I’m not mad. A little stunned. This is really happening?” Her lips curve into a tentative smile.

“She’s putting it all on paper so there won’t be any disputing it, should anything happen to her or me. And if you don’t want me to be the manager, I’ll help you find someone else.”

“I could never buy this building. I saw how much Graham was paying for it.” Her face blanches.

“Not yet, but someday you will. Maybe you’ll have studios all over the city.” I wave one hand in the air. “Whatever it is you want, you’ll do it. I have no doubt.”

A small, strangled laugh finally slips from her lips. “I don’t know what to say.”

“How about, Archer Holland is the best boyfriend alive.”

“He is.” She leans forward and kisses me. “This is the nicest thing anyone’s ever done for me. If I weren’t already stupid in love with you, I would be now.”

She still looks shocked, but she’s smiling and that’s all I ever want.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

She looks up toward the ceiling like she’s deep in thought. “Does this mean you’re my landlord now?”

“Eh...” I bob my head side to side. “More like your supervisor.”

“And what will the working conditions be like?”

“There’ll be a lot of kissing anytime I stop by.” I do just that. “Maybe some late nights working together. Possibly naked.”

She links her hands behind my head and smiles. “I think I can manage that.”

“Good because it starts now.”

SABRINA

“Does he even like surprises?” I ask Brogan as we blow up balloons for the party. It’s too little, too late if he says no, but I’m spiraling and rethinking this whole plan.

“Stop freaking out.” He chuckles. “He’ll love it.”

We’re surprising Archer with a birthday party tonight—two days before the actual day. His brothers are all here, a lot of his teammates, and friends from Valley and Lake City. It seemed like a great idea until now.

What if he walks in and sees everyone and walks right back out? Okay, that’s unlikely. But he could very well walk in, fake a big smile, and I’d be able to tell instantly he hates it.

Right now, Archer is out to dinner with Slade, my wingman, who convinced him to go out for a couple beers to help Slade heal his broken heart. I happen to know for a fact that he is not the least bit upset after the most recent girl he was seeing called things off because just last night he texted me a picture of a woman he started talking to on an app that he was “going to marry.”

The man is smooth. I wonder if it’s the waterbed or his diamond necklaces that seal the deal for him?

“Thank you for helping me,” I say as Brogan ties off another clear balloon with confetti inside.

“Are you kidding? I love this. My sister throwing my best friend a birthday party, being all in love and shit.” He beams. His happiness at the

situation keeps me from slipping into panic mode.

I chuckle softly. "I do love the shit out of him."

"I'm glad. He's the best guy I know. I couldn't imagine anyone more perfect for him."

"He says the same about you."

Brogan smiles. "How are your mom and dad?"

"I don't know. You tell me." Since he met my parents, Brogan's been texting with them almost as much as I do. My mom loves having someone to dote on and Brogan is eating up the attention, asking her for help with things like laundry and cooking. It's the cutest and possibly strangest thing.

He huffs a quiet laugh. "I haven't talked with them in a few days."

"Uh-oh. Momma Whitlock will be tracking you down soon if you don't check in."

He smiles as if he likes the idea. I try not to let myself feel the loss of not knowing him my whole life and just focus on being grateful that we have this incredible relationship now.

"Speaking of your parents, I got tickets for you to give them for all the remaining home games of the season."

"They'll love that," I say, then his words register. "Why would I give them the tickets if you got them?"

"I thought it'd be nicer coming from you." He won't quite meet my eyes, and I fight a smile. He wants them there for him and maybe because he thinks it's what I want, but I doubt his reservations are about any of that.

I place a hand on his shoulder. "They already adore you and are planning on watching every game on TV. My dad bought two new Mavericks jerseys—Archer's and yours—and he's rotating them every game. You do not need to be shy about asking them to come. They'll be ecstatic."

"Really?" He grins like a kid who just found out he's getting a present he's always wanted. And I guess he is. My mom and dad are the best and I'm thrilled to share them.

I nod. "Really."

"All right. I'm going to text them right now." He abandons the balloons and pulls out his phone.

Knox and his fiancée, Avery, walk over while I'm still chuckling at Brogan's eagerness.

"Do you need any help?" Avery asks. Tonight is the first time I've met her, but I'm already obsessed with her. She's short with long blonde hair and

dressed in a light pink dress that gives off vibes of a nice, quiet personality, but I've heard enough about her to know she's all fire under her sweet exterior.

"That would be great. I underestimated how long it would take to blow up three hundred balloons. I should have gotten a helium tank."

She laughs and reaches for the balloons, taking one for herself and one for Knox. He is her opposite, at least in appearance. He looks a little angry, a little rough around the edges in black jeans and a black T-shirt. At least until he looks at Avery. Then he goes all soft and sweet.

Flynn wanders over, too, and silently starts helping.

"Have you heard anything yet?" Knox asks him.

By the automatic darkening of his gaze, I know he's asking about baseball. I haven't had a chance to talk with Flynn one-on-one that much, but I've gathered that he's still feeling down after being let go by the Twins.

"You know you're welcome to crash with me and Avery until you figure out what's next." Knox's expression is filled with concern.

"I know," Flynn says. "But I'm good here."

It looks like he wants to object, but Knox nods and Avery leans into his side.

The oldest Holland brother, Hendrick, and his wife, Jane, are helping London hang up a banner over the island that says, "Happy Birthday, Archer". London painted it by hand so it's stunning, as is everything else she does. Honestly, he may not even notice the balloons. Or the confetti cannon.

"Slade just texted. They're leaving the bar now and he says Archer is tipsy." Brogan taps out what I assume is a reply to Slade and then pockets his phone.

My nerves ramp up with my excitement.

"Tipsy Archer is fun," Knox says with a glint in his eye that makes me wonder about the stories he could tell me. I make a mental note to ask later.

We tie off a few more balloons and then scatter around the living room and kitchen to hide. Which is easier said than done with big, football guys. Tripp is lying behind the couch, but his feet stick out on one side, and Merrick is squeezed next to the refrigerator holding so still it doesn't look like he's breathing.

I'm squatting behind the island. Brogan is next to me, holding a hand over his mouth like he's afraid he's going to laugh out loud at any moment. And Flynn is beside him, wearing a smile that makes him look as young as he

is.

The apartment is dark and quiet. When the front door opens, I hold my breath and listen for Archer. I wish I could see him right now.

“Sabrina!” Archer yells my name louder than I’ve ever heard him yell anything. My eyes widen and I have to bite down on my bottom lip to keep from answering.

“Shit. Fuck. Why is it so dark in here?” he asks in a slurred voice as his footsteps move closer.

“Watch where you’re going there.” Slade’s voice comes out in a laugh. “For a guy that’s paid to be nimble and agile, you’re struggling to walk in a straight line right now, Holland.”

“Sabrina!” He calls my name again—just as loud as the first time. “I’m home! Where are you, sexy woman?”

There’s a snicker from somewhere in the room, but Archer either doesn’t hear it or is too preoccupied with finding me.

“Sabrina, baby, I’m good and drunk and ready to fuc —”

“Surprise!” I jump out from my hiding spot before he can say any more. My face is hot and there’s a deep chuckle before everyone else joins in.

“Surprise!” They come out of their hiding spots, and someone flips on the lights.

Archer swivels around like he thinks we’re talking to someone else. He does a full circle and then faces us again. A slow, drunk smile pulls at his lips.

“Tipsy?” Hendrick asks quietly from somewhere nearby and then snorts. “He’s wasted.”

I shove the confetti cannon at Brogan and then walk toward my boyfriend. The closer I get, the more unsteady he looks on his feet.

“You’re throwing me a birthday party?” he asks me.

I nod. “Surprise!”

“Aww. That’s so nice and you look so pretty.” His gaze slides over me. I’m wearing a new dress and my favorite over-the-knee boots. “And I am very drunk.”

I stifle a laugh as he hugs me, nearly taking me down with his limp weight.

“I thought you were just grabbing a beer or two.”

“I was trying to be a good friend. I’m so happy and in love and he seemed so heartbroken.” He waves a hand to indicate Slade behind him.

I look around Archer to glare at Slade, who holds up his hands with a guilty expression on his face.

“That was so sweet of you.”

I walk Archer to the kitchen where I pull out a glass and fill it with water. “Here. Drink this.”

The rest of the party hovers nearby. As soon as he’s drained the glass, he hugs each of his brothers and their partners, then his friends.

I keep refilling his water and standing nearby in case he needs someone to prop him up. By the time he’s said hello to everyone, he’s looking a little more alert. While he and Tripp are chatting, Archer keeps me at his side. He wraps one arm around me and rests his open palm on my ass, letting his fingers trail absently along the hem and occasionally under. More alert but obviously still drunk.

Tripp politely tries not to notice as I swat Archer’s hand away.

“I’m going to mingle,” I say with a small laugh. I lean in and kiss him before I go.

I grab myself another drink—might as well join my drunk boyfriend—and find London. She’s sitting with Avery and Jane.

“Hey,” they all say in unison as I join them.

“How’s the birthday boy?” Avery asks with a grin.

“Having a great time,” I say, taking a seat. “Not that he’ll remember it tomorrow.”

“It’s good to see him so happy,” Jane comments.

I glance back at Archer. He’s smiling and laughing, which isn’t all that unusual, but there’s an ease in his posture and in his movements that pulls at my heartstrings.

“He does look happy. Doesn’t he?” A smile stretches across my face.

“You’ve made him that way.” London bumps my knee with hers. “When you walk into the room, he lights up. It’s the sweetest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Archer glances around like he’s looking for something. When his gaze lands on me, his smile softens, and he lifts one hand and gives me his signature half heart.

“See what I mean?” London asks the others as I reciprocate the hand motion.

It’s nice getting to know Archer’s brothers and their partners. Seeing him surrounded by all the people that love him so much makes my heart happy. I lose track of Archer as I’m playing hostess and making the rounds. I head

toward his bedroom, half-expecting him to be passed out cold on his bed. Freaking Slade. I'm totally going to get him back for this.

He's sitting on his bed with his phone cradled in both hands.

"Hey. Is everything okay?" I ask. "Drunk texting?"

"Yeah. I'm good. I think I'm only slightly tipsy now." He stands and sets his phone on his nightstand. When he reaches me, he wraps his arms around my waist and lets them fall to my lower back. "Thank you for tonight. This was perfect. Sorry I almost ruined it."

"Not too much?" I ask because him sneaking off in the middle of it is not a good sign. "If it is, I'm blaming Brogan. It was all his idea. He said you would love it."

"I did. Best surprise I've ever had."

"Well in that case, it was all me and you're welcome."

He chuckles softly. His smile stays intact so I don't think he's upset but something is definitely going on for him to hide away while his friends and family are all here.

"What's going on?" I ask him, bringing my hands up to rest on his chest.

He dips his head to kiss my fingertips. "I took your advice."

"You're finally going to start listening to lullabies at night?" I joke. I've gotten so used to falling asleep to his rock music, I'm not sure even I could doze off without it at this point.

He shakes his head, eyes lit up with humor before they dim with a more serious expression. "I texted my dad."

Something a lot like dread slowly seeps in and makes words hard to form. Yes, I suggested it, but I'll be honest, I didn't really think he would. And I get it. His dad let him down in the worst possible way. He deserves so much better. But I also want him to have a chance to make amends before it's too late. I hope his dad doesn't let him down, but if he does, then he has so many people in his life ready to give him the support and love that he needs.

"Did he respond?" I ask tentatively.

"He did." Archer nods, then works his jaw side to side before adding, "He wished me a happy early birthday. I don't know if Flynn reminded him or maybe he just remembered. I don't know. I wish it didn't seem so strange to think my own dad might know my birthday."

The anger that rises as I wonder how many years he's gone without hearing from his dad on his birthday makes me almost regret telling Archer to reach out. But the past is the past. And this is about the future.

ARCHER

On the first Saturday in December, Ribbons & Twirls has their first ever Winter Recital. Since it opened, Sabrina has filled nearly every class, has a waiting list for the youngest ones, and hired two part-time instructors. I love watching her dreams come true.

All the kids are sitting around the studio and the classes take turns, one by one, performing their routines. It starts with the youngest kids first. They're so small that a chorus of "aww" goes up as they take the floor.

"Look at my niece. Isn't she the cutest ballerina you've ever seen?" Slade is front and center, probably blocking all the people behind him from seeing the dance floor with his big head and wide shoulders. He points and waves at a little girl standing off on the left side waving back shyly. He cups his hands on either side of his mouth and yells, "You got this, Shelby!"

"Ready?" Sabrina mouths too quiet for me, and probably anyone else, to hear. As the music starts, she begins to move. All the little eyes on the dance floor follow her and mimic her movements. A warmth spreads through my chest as I watch her lead the kids through a short routine filled with turns and something I've learned is a pli  .

Sabrina is so graceful it's hard not to watch her, and she looks like she's having as much fun as the kids.

Brogan leans over and nudges me, then signs, *I want one.*

One what? I sign back.

A kid. Maybe five or six. He grins so wide as my brows lift to meet my

hairline and then he turns his attention back to the performance while wrapping an arm around London on the other side of him.

I chuckle to myself. A year ago, that would have been hard to picture, but now I can see it. Brogan and London with a bunch of kids, and me and Sabrina babysitting, maybe even with a couple of our own. I can see it a dozen different ways, but they all include her.

As one class finishes to a round of applause, the next stands and prepares to take their place. I spot Greer among the new group and a smile tugs at my lips. The entire class of kids are dressed in blue tutus and sparkly tiaras.

When they take their positions, Greer is front and center. She smiles, revealing a missing tooth since the last time I saw her. I glance around for Olivia, finding her off to one side with her phone raised to video the whole thing, no doubt.

Like she'd done with the others, Sabrina stands where the kids can watch her for cues and then starts them off. They all raise their arms out in front of them, each of them making a heart with their hands.

Sabrina meets my gaze and smiles a little wider. I've started doing the sign every time I make a touchdown. I didn't mean to make it a whole thing. It's just every time I make it into the end zone, I'm thinking of her. And I want her to know that I feel the love and support she gives me, not just on game day but every day.

As the music starts up, the kids move in unison. It's a heavier beat than the other songs. Less classical, more rock. It makes me grin as it vibrates through the studio.

And unlike the dancers before, they don't just wave their hands around in the typical graceful way. I realize almost immediately they're signing the lyrics.

My heart squeezes in my chest and my throat is thick with emotion. I feel my teammates' eyes turn on me to get my reaction. I couldn't explain it if I wanted to. I just, fuck, I love her so damn much. No one has ever gone to such great lengths to show me that they accept me exactly as I am.

I love you, I sign to her as the dance continues.

"I love you too," she mouths as a blush creeps onto her face.



It's another hour before the last class has finished. The guys and I are standing in the back of the studio laughing as we watch Slade, who has his niece up on his shoulders, show off *his* dance moves.

It feels like an eternity until Sabrina has talked to every parent or kid who wanted to thank her. When she finally reaches me, she looks exhausted but happy.

"Congratulations." I hold out the bouquet of roses to her.

Her smile brightens and she takes them, lifting them to her face and breathing them in. "Thank you."

Brogan steps closer, offering her his bouquet, which is annoyingly bigger. "That was the best dance recital I've ever seen."

It's the only one he's ever seen, but I don't point that out.

"Thank you, guys, for being here." She hugs him and then London, then Slade stops dancing long enough to hug her too.

I wait my turn, letting her soak up all the love and support here for her today. She deserves it.

The studio has started to clear out when she finally returns to me.

"Did you enjoy the recital?"

"What wasn't there to enjoy? I got to stare at you for two hours straight."

Light laughter makes her shoulders shake.

"It was great. I love that you had Greer's class signing the lyrics. That was awesome."

"And dancing to rock music." She grins and then her face falls serious. "I couldn't have done this without you. And everyone should know some sign language."

"I love you."

"I love you too." She leans forward and kisses me, then whispers, "In case that wasn't obvious."

A tug on my shirt has me glancing to the side. Greer beams up at me. "Did you see me, Uncle Arch?"

My insides liquify at her calling me her uncle. I'm honored actually.

"I sure did." I squat down in front of her and then hold out my hand for a high five. She slaps her little palm against mine with spunk.

"Aunt Brina promised to teach me more signs too so I can talk to you even when you aren't wearing your ears." The look of excitement on her face at the prospect is the sweetest thing I've ever seen.

"I'll teach you one right now. Ready?" I ask her.

Her eyes widen and she nods quickly, watching me intently.

I make the letter P and then tap my left shoulder and move it down and across my torso. Greer follows intently. Her tongue peeks out between her lips as she attempts it on her own. She gets close, but it's obvious she's already forgotten.

"This is a letter P," I say, helping her form the letter with her own hand, then I move it the same way I did. "Shoulder to opposite hip."

I drop her hand and then watch her do it on her own.

"What does it mean?" she asks eagerly after she's successfully done it twice.

"Princess."

Her eyes light up and she does the sign again. "Like that?"

"That was perfect."

She turns and runs off toward her friends and shows them how to sign it.

I stand in front of Sabrina, and she smiles at me in that soft, doe-eyed way that I recognize from Brogan and my brothers falling in love. But I never thought anyone would look at me like that.

I love you, I sign to her. Three little words that encompass everything and yet somehow still don't even scratch the surface of my feelings.

ARCHER

Rain spits from the sky in the final minutes of the game. It's been a tough one—not that any of them are easy, but the last field goal put us up by ten and has me breathing a little easier as the clock ticks down.

I glance over to the stands where Flynn is sitting. My dad is next to him. A weird sensation settles in my stomach every time I see him. This is the second game he's attended and while I still don't know how I feel about him or if I'm ready to have a relationship, I don't hate having him here.

Another person I don't hate being here is Max. My interpreter hangs back. He's wearing a Mavericks polo and black pants. He has the appearance of being completely unaware, but the second I look to him, he's always ready.

I wasn't sure what it'd be like relying on him instead of keeping a constant vigilance myself, but we've found a nice rhythm working together and I have to admit I've been able to relax a little and focus on myself instead of worrying about everyone around me.

I glance back at my dad and Flynn as Brogan nudges me with his elbow.

"Is this two games in a row?" he asks.

I tear my gaze away from my dad. "Yeah."

"Are you going to talk to him after this one?"

"I don't know," I say honestly. "Maybe. I can't decide. But I do think it's time to let the past go."

"Looking to the future?" he asks.

I nod. "Yeah, something like that."

His lips pull into a smirk. "Maybe one with a certain sister of mine."

I can't help but smile in return. "You're going to be the biggest pain in my ass as a brother-in-law, aren't you?"

The smile on his face slips for a second and his expression is dazed, making me worry he isn't as on board with Sabrina being my end game as I thought he was.

"Damn, I just realized we'll finally be related for real when you marry Sabrina. And she'll be a Holland. It feels right since I've felt like one most of my life."

Relief and happiness pour through me. "You've always been my brother. Now it'll just be a little more official."

"Assuming she says yes," he taunts.

Fuck. I hadn't considered that she might not say yes.

As if he can read my thoughts, which after all these years wouldn't even surprise me, he says, "She'll say yes. She's crazy about you."

"Will you help me ask her?"

"Tonight?"

I nod. I've been carrying the ring around for a few days now, trying to figure out when and where I should pop the question and freaking out that maybe it's too soon. But today, tomorrow, or next year—I'm ready.

"Yeah." He nods. "Hell fucking yeah."



After the game, I text Sabrina to ask her to meet me at the studio in an hour. Now that I'm managing the place, I have my own key, but this is the first time I've used it.

I let us in, and the guys help me decorate. We've got dozens of vases of roses and candles. My nerves are bouncing all around the place and I'm frantically pacing while the guys light every single candle.

"Let me see the ring," Slade says, grinning.

I pull it out of my pocket and crack the box open.

"Daaamn, Holland."

"Is that a good 'daaamn'?" I ask. He's smiling, but I get the feeling he would be either way. I'm not convinced he isn't still trying to steal my girl,

and me fucking this up would be a good opening for him.

"It's beautiful." He claps me on the shoulder and squeezes a little harder than necessary. "You're a lucky man."

"Thanks," I say, and he doesn't let go. "That kind of hurts."

"Mhmmm." He keeps grinning at me. "I know."

He finally lets go and I roll my shoulder back. Chuckling, I close the ring box and slide it back in my pocket.

"Okay." Brogan claps his hands together as he comes to stand in front of me. "Everything is set."

I glance around the studio. Flowers and candles have been set up to form a walkway from the front door to the dance floor. It looks better than I could have imagined.

"Thank you for this," I say, stepping forward and hugging him. "Love you, brother."

"Love you too." He pats my back and moves back. "We're going to get out of your way before she gets here. Text me and let me know how it goes and then come to Slade's so we can celebrate."

"He's having a party?" I ask, glancing around for the big guy, but he's already gone.

"Of course. It's a big night and we're throwing you an epic engagement party."

"Doe Slade know you're hijacking his party?"

"It was his idea."

"Probably hoping she says no and comes crying to him," I mutter. My palms are sweaty.

"She won't say no." He smacks me softly on the cheek. "Look at this face. You're a good guy, funny, handsome, your friends are top-notch. And I've seen you naked." He gives me a thumbs-up.

"Okay. Okay." I wave off the pep talk as he bursts out laughing.

I take a deep breath. I'm ready. No matter her answer, I need her to know this is where I'm at. She's it for me.

His laughter dies off and he stares at me a beat, smiling but not saying anything. But that's the thing about me and Brogan. We know each other so well that I don't need for him to tell me how happy he is, I can see it. And I bet when he looks at me, he sees the same thing.

Once the guys are all gone, I go to stand on the dance floor. Every second feels like an eternity, but the moment Sabrina walks through the door, time

stands still. Fuck, she's beautiful.

"What did you do?" she asks, walking toward me slowly as she takes in all the roses and candles. When her gaze lands back on me, she has tears in her eyes.

"I can't take all the credit. Your brother has a flair for romantic gestures."

She laughs quietly. "What's the occasion?"

My heart rate picks up. "Just a little planning meeting."

Her brows lift up, but she doesn't question that.

I take her right hand in mine. She looks nervous now but touching her has my anxiousness abating.

"I can't tell you how happy I am to have you in my life. You amaze me and inspire me. Look at what you did with this place." I glance around. This place feels like her: fun and welcoming.

"I want a front-row seat to all the big things you're going to accomplish. I want to be there, supporting and loving you, the same way you've done for me. You have made my life so much better. Loving you has made me better. I feel like I was only half-living before you."

I drop her hand so I can pull the ring box out of my pocket and then get down on one knee. A smile spreads across her face with a laugh that comes out like a sob.

"Every piece of me loves every piece of you, Sabrina Whitlock. Will you marry me?"

"Yes!" She signs the word a dozen times in between wiping away tears.

My heart is racing as I stand and put the ring on her finger. Sabrina stares at it slack-jawed.

"It's the most beautiful ring I've ever seen." She holds it over her heart. "And heavy."

Chuckling, I take her hand in mine. "I might have to get you another one for the other hand to even out the weight distribution."

She steps forward and flings her arms around my neck.

"I love you forever," she says as she clings to me.

I wrap her up and hold her against me, picturing doing this a million more times through every stage of our lives. I'm looking forward to all of it.

EPILOGUE

SABRINA

“You look beautiful.” Olivia stares at me with glassy eyes.

“Thank you.” I rest a hand at my waist and take a deep breath. “Is it time?”

My best friend nods. “If you’re ready.”

“I’ve been ready since the second he asked me to marry him,” I admit.

It’s my wedding day!

We decided to do it at my parents’ house. A small, intimate ceremony and reception in the backyard with only our closest friends and family, but it’s turned out to be more people than we planned. Between Archer’s brothers and their partners and all his teammates, it was nearly impossible to keep the guest list small. Even his dad is in attendance.

“I’m so happy for you.” London hugs me. “And for me. We’re going to be sisters!”

We both laugh. She and Brogan haven’t tied the knot yet. They’re eloping later this summer, and Archer and I are going with them to be their witnesses, but I already think of her as my sister.

“You look like a princess!” Greer says, drawing my attention down to her.

“So do you.” I adjust the tiara on her head. It seemed only fitting that my flower girl get to pick out her own accessories.

She beams up at me.

“Time to go, baby.” Olivia leads her daughter to the door, London trailing

behind them.

My mom steps up to me. She's been crying at every mention of the wedding since Archer and I got to town earlier this week. But now her eyes are dry.

"I'm so proud of you, honey. You're glowing, which tells me you picked the right man." She hugs me gently and I breathe her in, throat tightening with emotion. I think she passed on her crying to me.

"Thanks, Mom," I manage to get out the words, but my voice is tight.

We head out of my childhood bedroom and through the house. Everyone else is already outside. White chairs are set up facing a floral archway. Music filters in from the open sliding doors.

Brogan's waiting for me just inside. His smile stretches across his face.

"Can I hug you or am I going to mess something up?" he asks, stepping closer but looking uncertain.

"I don't care." I reach for him, wrapping my arms around his neck and squeezing him. "I'm so glad you're here."

"Of course." He chuckles lightly as he pulls back. "Where else would I be?"

"No, I mean, I'm glad you're *here*. In my life. It makes this day so perfect."

"Plus, I introduced you to the groom." He winks.

"Yeah, thanks for that."

"You're welcome." He glances back. "He's pretty excited."

"Me too."

"All right. See you up there, little sister."

His words hit me in the chest. When I was a kid dreaming about this day, I never imagined I'd have a brother.

Mom gives me one last hug and then Brogan walks her outside and up to the front row.

When the music starts up, Olivia goes out first. Then London. Then Greer. She gets the appropriate amount of "ooohs" and "awws" when she twirls around as she throws the rose petals. Archer gives her a fist bump when she gets to the front, and Greer goes to stand in front of her mom. My dad holds his arm out for me. "Ready, pumpkin?"

"Ready."

We step into the doorway. Archer stands at the altar waiting for me. Brogan and Flynn are standing with him, but it's hard to look anywhere but at

my soon-to-be husband.

His smile widens as we take each other in for the first time. And when the music changes, I watch the surprise play out on his face. It only seemed appropriate to walk down the aisle to rock music, and the smile on his face was totally worth it.

When I reach the front, Dad kisses my cheek and shakes Archer's hand.

Archer steps forward and kisses me.

Someone clears their throat and when we pull back, Brogan steps up closer to Archer.

"I think you're supposed to wait for that part," he says and signs.

Archer wears a sheepish grin as he steps back. We went with traditional vows and a simple ceremony. His gaze is locked on my mouth even though I sign as I speak. When he speaks his vows, his voice wavers and I almost cry again.

Then it's finally time to kiss again. This time, no amount of throat clearing could stop us. Archer kisses me like no one is watching. Sorry, Mom and Dad.

When we finally come up for air, all the guests are on their feet. I can hear Slade's booming voice over everyone else. And my mom is definitely crying again.

Archer squeezes my hand in his. When I look over at him, he lifts his left hand. The one adorned with a shiny new wedding band.

Wife, he signs the word, and I think it's my favorite one yet.

Husband.



Thank you for reading Comeback! I hope you enjoyed Archer and Sabrina's story. Missing these two already? See what happens when Archer and Sabrina take the next step and adopt a kitty in their [bonus scene](#)—featuring a special appearance by the last Holland brother, Flynn!

Ready for more of the Holland brothers? Flynn's story is next. [Spotlight](#) is coming spring 2025 pre-order now!

Can't wait for [Spotlight](#)?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rebecca Jenshak is a *USA Today* bestselling author of new adult and sports romance. She lives in Arizona with her family. When she isn't writing, you can find her attending local sporting events, hanging out with family and friends, or with her nose buried in a book.

Sign up for her [newsletter](#) for book sales and release news.